

hi-fi news

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

& Record Review

TUBULAR BELLES

KTRLab's musical treasure



RY COODER

Bop Till You Drop - digital LP

Feisty Floorstanders

Paradigm Signature 8

KEF Reference 207/2

Wadia S7i

High-end CD spinner



Clearaudio Turntable
Innovation Compact on test

**'Sony's
Walkman
Pro - birth
of a legend'**
See p116

Show Blog
Hi-Fi News in California

Group Test
Six £1000 amplifiers rated



• **PLUS** 13 pages of music features • **VINYL RE-RELEASE** Van Halen's debut disc on 180g LP
• **HI-FI @ HOME** Keeping radio alive • **INVESTIGATION** Jazz re-performance at Abbey Road
• **VINTAGE** Technics SP-10 turntable on test • **READERS' CLASSIFIEDS** Scores of hi-fi bargains

UK £4.00 US \$9.99 Aus \$9.95



MUSICAL FIDELITY

M6PRE

Fully balanced preamp. Inputs: Phono. USB. Balanced. 4 line.
Outstanding technical performance.

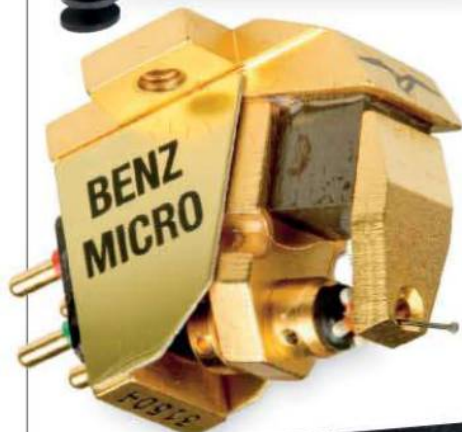
M6PRX

260wpc. Dual mono. High current. Choke regulated.
Outstanding technical performance.

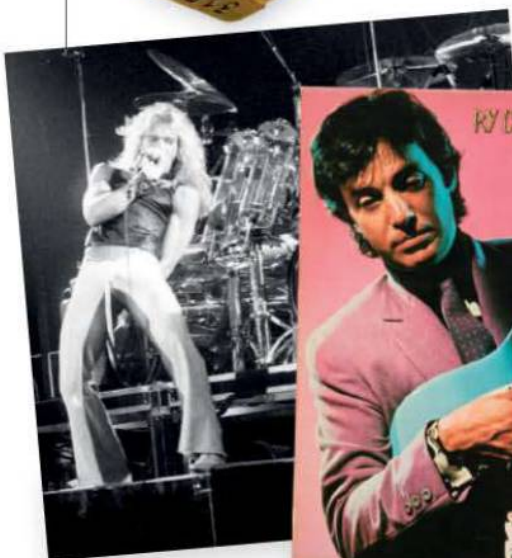




ABOVE: No mere disc player, the Wadia S7i also offers a digital out (with clock return) and DAC with three digital filter options. See p52



LEFT: The Benz Micro Glider MC pick-up, now in 'SL' guise and better than ever. See p60



VINYL: We play air guitar along with the eponymous *Van Halen* LP on p68, while Ry Cooder's *Bop Till You Drop* is our Vinyl Icon (p70)

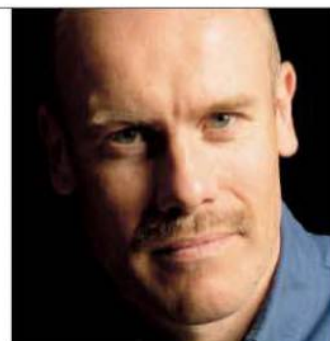


Switch off the TV and the radio. Put away the newspaper and delete the links to any streaming news media on your PC. We've all seen the headlines, but I'm kinda fed up with being told about the protracted age of austerity that's upon us. So let's turn instead to our favourite hi-fi magazine and celebrate all that's fabulous about high-end audio, from the technically innovative to the frankly bizarre.

One thing is for certain, while plain vanilla hi-fi is taking a bit of a knock, the artisans of our audio world are re-doubling their efforts. Instead of pulling up the shutters, high-end hi-fi – the very lifeblood of *Hi-Fi News* and every seasoned enthusiast in the land – is witnessing even greater diversification.

Take this month's cover star by way of illustration. The KTRLab 845 is probably the largest but least powerful (and certainly the least efficient) amplifier ever to grace our front door. Its core 845 triodes started life in the early '30s and yet, 80 years on, this amplifier retains the capacity to bring the most modern digital media to life.

These big triode amps are the polar opposite of cutting-edge silicon embodied in products like the Devialet D-Premier, the amplifier that graced our April cover. And yet both amplifiers



were conceived of and designed with exactly the same goal in mind – bringing the best seat in the house to the feet of the discerning music lover. Only a few very fortunate enthusiasts will ever own such amplifiers but that partnership will be magical, musical and enduring.

On a more personal note I should add that life with a set

'The audiophile collective has never had it so good'

of monster triodes running off 1200V HT rails and radiating as much heat as a small radiator also invites you into a world of, um, some craziness. I used the KRTs for a few days, but only at night when the heat of the day had subsided! Readers with small children and/or inquisitive pets should probably resist the allure of such substantive and exposed bottles. But with such diversity of choice, the audiophile collective has never had it so good.

PAUL MILLER EDITOR

HI-FI NEWS' EXPERT LINE UP: THE FINEST MINDS IN AUDIO JOURNALISM BRING THEIR EXPERIENCE TO BEAR ON ALL AREAS OF HI-FI & MUSIC



BARRY FOX
Investigative journalist supreme, Barry is the first with news of the latest developments in hi-fi and music technologies



JOHN BAMFORD
JB brings huge industry experience, a penchant for massive speakers and a love of hi-res audio in all its diverse guises



KEN KESSLER
is currently our Senior Contributing Editor and almost singularly responsible for the renaissance in valves and 'vintage hi-fi'



KEITH HOWARD
has written about hi-fi for 30 years, and edited *Hi-Fi Answers* for nine. KH performs our speaker and headphone lab tests



STEVE HARRIS
Former Editor of this very title from 1986 through to 2005. A lifetime in audio and a love of jazz makes Steve a goldmine



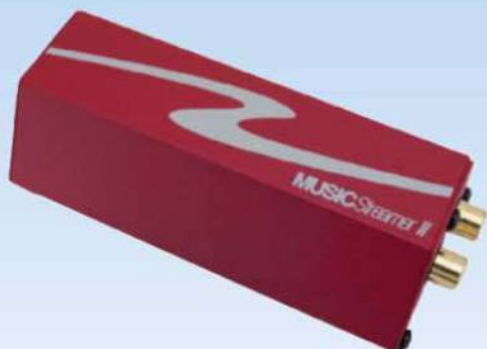
JOHN HOWES
Foremost collector and archivist of vintage hi-fi, famous for the UK's bi-annual *Audio Jumble*, John shares his experience with *HFN*



STEVE SUTHERLAND
Worked on *Melody Maker* and then edited *NME* from 1992-2000, the Britpop years. Steve brings a unique slant to our Vinyl Release pages

for the love of music...

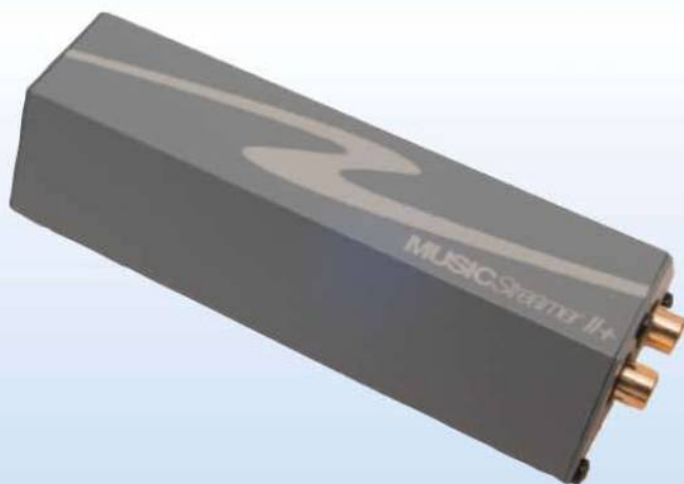
Music Streamer II



Music Streamer Pro



Music Streamer II+



2nd generation Music Streamers

Innovative way of
high-resolution, faithful
and accurate streaming of
computer music files

Avalon Acoustics • Avalon Music Systems • Cardas • conrad-johnson • finite elemente • **HiResTech**
Karan Acoustics • Kuzma • McCormack • modul by finite elemente
Muse Electronics • Rogue Audio • Tri-Planar • Zanden Audio
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ABOVE: Integrated amp group test, p37

BELOW: Hi-fi @ Home – sonic serenity p88



Leema's on the Pulse

MKIII CD PLAYER AND INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER WITH SUPER-SVELTE STYLING AND NEW CONTROL INTERFACE



First demonstrated in early form at the Bristol Hi-Fi Show in February, the slot-loading Stream III CD player and 80W Pulse III integrated amplifier are now officially launched. Both units feature precision-machined alloy fascias and the company's new 'Navimech' user interface which promises 'delightfully simple and intuitive, control'. Under the Stream III's bonnet lies a refined version of Leema's MD2 Multi-DAC converter – already a proven performer in previous *Hi-Fi News* tests of the Stream player.

In addition to its coaxial digital output, the Stream III also offers a USB output. Moreover, both the Stream III and Pulse III amp are equipped with four digital inputs: two optical, one coaxial and one bi-directional 16-bit/48kHz-capable USB. Naturally, the Pulse III also carries a series of analogue inputs including MM/MC phono, CD, tuner, a configurable AV input, a tape loop and a front-mounted MP3 player input. Preamp, headphone and speaker outputs complete the Pulse's repertoire.

Leema Acoustics Ltd, 01938 811900
www.leema-acoustics.com

Meridian M80

HIGH PERFORMANCE COMPACT AUDIO

No mere fashion accessory, Meridian's latest system-in-a-box combines both CD and DVD player, DAB/AM/FM radio, an i80 iPod dock, multiple analogue and digital inputs together with a bespoke 2.1 DSP loudspeaker system. Meridian's i80 link allows iPod selections to be navigated via the M80 front panel or from across the room using the M80 remote control. The instantly recognisable shape is fashioned from a mineral-loaded composite and is finished in a range of carefully selected British hand-stitched leathers, including Obsidian Black, Chestnut, and Ivory. Suggested retail price is £1500.

Meridian Audio Ltd, 01480 445678
www.meridian-audio.com



HI-FI NEWS' NUGGETS

DISCOUNTED VINYL

Classic LPs is holding a '33.3% off' record mega-sale on Sept 25-26th to coincide with the National Audio Show. Classic LPs' warehouse in the Malvern Hills will be open and offering discounts on 2000 brand new vinyl titles, including several hundred high-end audiophile LPs. Customers also get a complimentary high-quality record cleaning cloth with each purchase. 01684 899 457, www.classiclp.co.uk

SUMMER OPEN DAY

On Saturday 18th Sept, New Malden's Unilet Sound & Vision will throw open its doors and host the unveiling of the new PMC TB2i Signature, FB1i Signature and AML2 active monitors, as part of its second open day of the summer. See www.unilet.net and www.pmc-speakers.com

HFN IN JUMBLE SALE

Calling all vintage audio fans – come meet *Hi-Fi News* at the next John Howes' Audio Jumble on Oct 10th. www.audiojumble.co.uk

Danish dynamics

AUDIOVECTOR NOW IN UK

Distributed solely in the UK by Henley Designs, Audiovector – the renowned Danish loudspeaker brand – has announced its new Si Series. While there are essentially just two models, the Si1 standmount and Si3 floostander [see right], each of these is available in one of five guises from Standard through to Super, Signature, Avantgarde and Avantgarde Arreté. Prices range from £1200-£3600 for the Si1 and £1950-£6590 for the Si3. The different 'grades' are distinguished by the quality of their bespoke drive units, their configuration and internal componentry although the cabinet dimensions remain unchanged. In tune with Audiovector's upgrade philosophy, any model may be upgraded to a higher version.

Audiovector,
01235 51116
www.henleydesigns.co.uk



Denon's A100 Collection

DENON CELEBRATES ITS 100TH ANNIVERSARY WITH SEVEN VERY EXCLUSIVE PRODUCTS

Denon's 100th Anniversary was trailed earlier this year but only now has the company announced the seven very special separates that will underscore its celebrations. Every product in the A100 range will be accompanied by a certificate of authenticity and a special collectors' edition coffee table book.

Hi-Fi News is especially excited by the news that Denon will offer a high performance direct-drive turntable, the DP-A100, equipped with a DL-A100 cartridge itself inspired by the legendary DL-103 moving-coil. Employing a high-torque motor, silicone rubber-damped alloy platter and lightweight S-shaped tonearm this will be the first new 'high-end' DD deck launched on any scale in years!

Two digital disc players will also be available – the DCD-A100 CD/SACD player and DBP-A100 universal BD player. The former is equipped with a top-of-the-range

'32-bit/192kHz' DAC, USB input and proprietary SVH disc mechanism. The Blu-ray player shares the same transport but also offers full compatibility with SACD, CD and DVD-A media along with the latest Denon Link 4 HDMI clocking regime.

Amplification comes in two and multichannel guises. The PMA-A100 integrated, partner to the DCD-A100, is rated at 2x80W and is equipped with a MM/MC phono input, four line and two tape inputs. The internal construction is massive with huge heatsinks and twin power supply transformers configured in parallel.

Home cinema buffs are treated to the AVR-A100, a nine-channel Full HD AV receiver (rated at 140W per channel) while the range is topped off



with its AH-A100 headphones – bespoke cans pitched at an estimated £500. The DL-A100 pick-up will sell for a similar sum, while each of the

separates has been priced at £2249. Reviews to follow...

D&M Holdings Inc,
02890 279830
www.denon.co.uk

Rega's new LP spinner

THE P1 IS DEAD – LONG LIVE THE RP1

As Rega's longstanding P1 turntable spins its last, the company is proud to announce a replacement in the form of the £225 RP1. Fulfilling Rega's familiar brief of elegant, gimmick-free design, unsurpassed ease-of-use and excellent reliability, the RP1 combines a belt-driven resin platter with a precision main bearing and sub-platter assembly. The slab-like plinth is available in three high quality colour finishes, including the 'Cool Grey' livery modelled below. Just as new is the hand-assembled RB101 tonearm which accompanies the RP1 deck and is fitted with an Ortofon OM5e moving magnet cartridge as part-and-parcel of the package.

Rega Research Limited,
01702 333071
www.rega.co.uk



Klipsch unveils revamp

REFERENCE SERIES UPGRADED TO MARK II STATUS



It's re-engineered drivers and a new crossover system all round as Klipsch announces the addition of no fewer than 17 models to its ten-year-old Reference speaker line-up. The models comprise five floorstanders [see the RF-7 II and RF-82 pictured left], four bookshelf models, four centre channels and four surround speakers. All Reference II Series models feature lightweight, rigid 'Cerametallic' woofer cones plus new Tractrix horn tweeters. Price points range from \$550 to \$3199 for a pair of floorstanding speakers and \$280 to \$799 for a pair of bookshelf models. UK prices to be confirmed.

TNS Distribution
0845 0822454
www.klipsch.co.uk

Elite series



Building upon the classic Quad sound, each Elite series product is enhanced according to the highest of our engineering standards to ensure that ease of use, seamless connectivity, fully balanced audio signals, plus intelligent control systems are achieved. Devised as a fully integrated system, each product in the Elite series works best when paired with one another, adding increased clarity and definition but foremost offering the integrity of musical performance and more accurately conveying the message contained in the actual music.

The Elite series comprises the Elite CDS CD Player, Elite CDP CD Player with Pre-Amp, Elite Pre-Amp, Elite Stereo Power Amp, Elite Mono Power Amp, Elite FM Tuner and flaunts a sleek new modern casework design using superior class cast alloy in matte black finish.

NAD takes to the airwaves

NEW 'ENERGY-SAVING' AM/FM TUNER FROM NAD

Following hard on the heels of *Hi-Fi News'* tuner group test [Sept '10] NAD has added to FM's analogue ranks with its £230 C426 model. Boasting a highly sensitive MOSFET RF front-end, this tuner offers 30 AM/FM station presets, 8-character preset naming and both PS (Station Name) and RT (Radio Text) facilities via RDS. The C426 also comes complete with a full function remote control while standby power consumption is down to just <0.5W.

Armour Home, 01279 501111; www.nadelectronics.com



Take a 'Me' Moment

LISTEN IN FAIR TRADE COMFORT

Available as a standalone chair (£525) or with built-in speakers and iPod holster (£700) the Solo is constructed using pale banana fibre woven onto a rattan pole frame. Speakers are concealed in the sides and base of the chair and a leather holster houses your player above the armrest – a new spin on an oft-revisted idea. No details about the drivers or amp were available...

Fair Trade Furniture Co,
01722 340 882
www.fairtradefurniture.co.uk



Flight of the Humbuster

SUPRA BREAKS THE GROUND LOOP

Do you suffer from 'Hum or noise, sparks or wandering picture phenomena?' asks Supra Cables. Its solution is available in the compact form of three GS Ground Separators for TV, CATV and radio aerial cables plus the AGS-10k Audio Ground Separator or 'Humbuster' for audio systems. Priced at £100 this little box

contains a pair of audio quality toroidal transformers, breaking any ground/hum loop that may exist between source and amplifier, for example.

The toroids have 1:1 primary/secondary windings and present a 10kohm input/output impedance. Importantly, the transformers are specified with a flat response from 15Hz-22kHz and very low distortion even through the lowest bass frequencies. The aluminium case aids screening while gold-plated RCAs complete this diminutive package.

Jenving Technology AB,
01223 441229
www.supracables.co.uk



Monitor Audio BX range

BRONZE BX BLENDS THE BEST OF MA'S BR AND RX RANGES

Comprising no fewer than two standmounts, two floorstanders, a surround speaker, multipurpose LCR speaker and a compact subwoofer with 10in driver and 200W Class D amp [see below], MA's Bronze BX range

is a wholesale evolution of its older BR series. The new Bronze BXs feature proprietary C-CAM (Ceramic-Coated Aluminium/Magnesium) drivers, single bolt driver fixings, improved crossovers, HiVE reflex ports, magnetic grille attachment

and a choice of four vinyl wood finishes.

Prices range from £200 for the small BX1 standmount to £650 for the flagship 2.5-way BX6 model. The BXW-10 sub will retail for £450.

Monitor Audio,
01268 740580,
www.monitoraudio.co.uk



HI-FI NEWS? JUST ASK...

If you can't always find a copy of this magazine, help is at hand! Complete this form, hand it in at your local store and they'll arrange for a copy of each issue to be reserved for you. Some stores may even be able to arrange for it to be delivered to your home. Just ask!

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IF YOU DON'T WANT TO MISS AN ISSUE...



Upcoming Events

IMPORTANT DATES FOR YOUR HI-FI DIARY

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| 25-26 SEPT | Audio Show 2010, Silverstone, www.chestergroup.org |
| 10 OCT | Audiojumble, Angel Leisure Centre, Tonbridge, Kent
www.audiojumble.co.uk |
| 16-17 OCT | Sound & Vision Manchester 2010
www.manchestershow.co.uk |
| 05-07 NOV | Northern Ireland Show, Stormont Hotel, Belfast
info@niaudioshow.com |

California Show 2010

Words & pictures: **Barry Willis**



Easily accessible, being situated at the eastern end of the San Francisco Bay Bridge, the Hilton Garden Inn in Emeryville was the site of the California Audio Show over the weekend of July 31-August 1.

Hundreds of visitors each day filled two large ground-level meeting rooms and four upper floors, where they test-drove equipment from dozens of manufacturers from across the globe, and systems put together by retailers from both the US and as far away as Canada.

Superbly organized and ably administered by Ann and Constantine Soo of *dagogo.com*, CAS was the Bay Area's first real audio exhibit in several years, other than the informal gatherings hosted by the Bay Area Audiophile Society (BAAS). According to a post-event newsletter from BAAS, whose meetings are often devoted to demonstrations of a single product, or discussions such as computer audio or room acoustics, the California Audio Show has spurred interest in more such events.



A typical set-up at such gatherings, this collection from Aesthetic Electronics includes a Rhea phono stage, Calypso line stage, and Janus preamplifier, all with outboard power supplies and all operable with one remote control. The Calypso and Janus feature fully balanced all-valve circuitry and discrete resistor volume controls with 88 1dB steps.



JBL's massive Everest DD-6600 cornerhorns occupied one end of a large meeting room belonging to Design Interaction of Redwood City CA. With a warm and woolly sound, the Everest is USA-built for the Japanese market, and is a rarity at audio shows Stateside.



Even for analogue agnostics, there's something compelling about big beautiful valve amps. The combination of gorgeous Win Analog V series amplifiers (\$75k/each) with Legacy Audio's huge Whisper XD loudspeakers was one of the most visually dazzling, but least fruitful pairings, at the event. The experiment required mucho tweaking and swapping of components – including deleting the Win preamp – to get an acceptable sound. Advice to would-be exhibitors: run your experiments off-site with plenty of lead-time!



The Mark Levinson No 502 media console is the \$35k replacement for the now discontinued No 40. The 502 features six HDMI inputs, full video switching, and claimed immunity to electromagnetic interference. The 502 may be the ideal centrepiece-for-all-seasons for upscale technophiles.



A hard-charging lawyer by day, and significant other of Elite Audio Systems founder Michael Woods, loquacious Charmaine Yee demo'd Sooloos music servers [see below right]. Despite her musical surroundings, Yee admitted that during long drives she listens 'mostly to talk radio'.



Synergistic Research's Galileo power supply provides DC bias to speaker cables in a bid to improve sound. Not found at CAS, despite an essay in the show guide, were LessLoss Blackbody spectral-energy dissipaters, said to minimize electromagnetic interaction among audio components.



The highly polished business end of a huge Acapella High Violoncello II speaker (\$80k/pair), demo'd by Loggie Audio of Redwood City and Aaudio Imports. Amps were Aelius monoblocks via Acapella Reference La Musika cables (\$21k/pair for 2.5m); sources were a Bergmann Sindre Airbearing turntable/ tonearm combo (\$21k) and an Ypsilon CDT100 disc transport/CD player (\$26k). Space precludes listing the secondary components. Bottom line: one of the show's more, er, expensive systems.



Elite Audio Systems had two suites – one with Krell and Linn electronics, Clearaudio GHB turntable/arm and Acoustic Zen speakers. The other, seen here, with Sooloos music server and Meridian DSP7200 digital active speakers, was one of the most elegant.

a class above

With the same innovations as KEF's revolutionary Concept Blade technology showcase, the all-new Q Series from KEF performs like speakers from a higher price class in terms of realism, musicality and off-axis dispersion.

Q Series

All new Uni-Q array.

Sweet, spacious and true, wherever you sit

A large vented tweeter in the centre of the bass/midrange driver, with a 'tangerine' waveguide and unique Z-flex surround to combine unrivalled dispersion with generous travel for the aluminium MF/LF cone.

Advanced bass technologies.

Deeper, tighter and more accurate bass

Inside the fashionably rectilinear cabinets, the new bass driver combines a rigid superlight cone with a massive vented magnet assembly and an oversized voice coil for exceptional sensitivity and distortion-free power handling.

Total system design.

A holistic approach, with no compromises.

These advanced new drivers only need first order crossovers, maximising fluency and transparency, and KEF's legendary attention to detail extends from innovations for easier bi-wiring to environment-friendly finishes.



Big CAT: overbuilt and gleaming, Convergent Audio Technologies' JL2 Signature Edition valve monoblock was as intimidating as a precision-tuned racecar. It features a welded-steel chassis, isolation-transformer power supply, slow power-on to extend tube life, and power triode output circuitry said to be highly stable.



Lotus Group boasted the most expensive system at CAS, just north of \$414k, including its Granada loudspeakers (\$125k/pair) and Steve McCormack's most recent preamp, the SMC VRE-1. Vinyl playback was superb with the Hanns Acoustic T-30 deck and all-valve PA-60 phono stage.



Design Interaction had attentive audiences all weekend for Revel's Ultima2 Salon loudspeakers (\$22k/pair), powered by a Mark Levinson No 532 amp (\$20k) via MIT Oracle cables. Other goodies in the system included a No 512 SACD player and No 526A preamp, pushing total system cost near \$100k. Revel is the most revered line in Harman International's roster, delivering consistently satisfying performance and excellent value. Yet at CAS the Ultima2 Salons weren't enormously involving – perhaps due to room acoustics or choice of recordings. As all audiophiles can attest, day-to-day and site-to-site performance variations can be maddening.



Grant Fidelity offers well-crafted Chinese electronics at a fraction of the prices of equipment made elsewhere. This elegant Opera-Consonance LP6.1 turntable with T988 arm is available factory direct for only \$1000. The player rivaled turntables priced several orders of magnitude higher.



Grant Fidelity won Uncle Barry's Recession Era Prudence Award at CAS. The complete system shown here – speakers, amps, preamp, and disc player – carry a combined retail price of only \$2700, less than some of the mains cords and interconnects shown by competitors.

Audiostyle *n.* hi-fi equipment that looks and feels as good as it sounds



Award Winning Hi-Fi

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-  Phone: +44 (0)1938 811900
-  Email: info@leema-acoustics.com

SHOWBLOG First sight of new products & technology



Teresonic's tall Ingenium Silver loudspeakers (\$14.5k/pair) and diminutive Magnus Silver model (\$5985) use single drivers in beautifully eccentric cabinets. The Ingenium's shape alludes to a curved bow, while the Magnus is a simple cylinder. As sonically seductive as it is visually alluring, the Ingenium has a warmly enveloping sound and deep bass. The amp is a Teresonic Reference 2A3 'pure class A, zero feedback, all-tube' design. The system included a Clearaudio Innovation Wood turntable with Universal arm and Benz Micro Ruby Z cartridge – a \$17k combo.



Based in San Francisco, US audio importer Tone of Music Audio got dulcet tunes from the Simon Yorke Designs S10 record player (\$19.5k). The turntable and arm are said to be milled and lathed by hand by Yorke and his son Spencer. TOMA coupled the deck to a Convergent Audio technologies preamp (\$10k) and JI2 Signature Edition amp (\$19,950). Loudspeakers were Quad ESL-2805 (\$10k/pair), which I still rank among the most enjoyable sound-emitting devices ever made.



Bulky shock-absorbing feet, two-tone visual design, large function buttons and a high-brightness display make the Lindemann 825 High Definition Disc Player impossible to ignore – or misuse. Exhibited by Aaudio Imports, the German-made 825 is claimed to be one of the best disc spinners in the world.



Sound sculptor: Alan Dwight Hulsebus of Raven Design Studio in Camarillo, California, displays a cutaway model showing the laminate construction of the Raven Ebb loudspeaker (\$12k/pair). A multi-driver design, it features a ribbon tweeter and Focal woofers. The Ebb has an upper frequency spec on paper of 50kHz, and is said to go down to 40Hz. An absence of parallel surfaces contributes to its low coloration while rear-firing drivers are claimed to improve the soundstage. Cabling is from Clarity. The Raven suite was one of several using the high-value Oppo BDP-83 SE universal disc player [see 'Opinion', *HFN* Sept '09].

Next month

Bob Hawkins reports from the Hong Kong Show 2010

Ghost in the machine...

Andy Rye heads to Abbey Road studios for a piano recital with a difference

It was in June's Investigation that we explored Pat Metheny's Orchestron project, which has seen the jazz guitarist writing and performing new compositions for an innovative assortment of mechanical instruments. Shortly after publication we heard about a session to record a set of solo piano re-performances by jazz legend Oscar Peterson, using sophisticated performance analysis software combined with a state-of-the-art Bösendorfer reproducer piano.

Zenph Systems of North Carolina has developed an analytical process which it describes as separating the original performance from the recording. Its goal is to translate original recordings into data that will accurately render the originals on an appropriate instrument, free from the constraints and limitations imposed by technology in the era of the recording. This makes it possible to use 78rpm records and even previously unreleased amateur tapes as viable sources.

PACKED WITH POTENTIAL

Zenph identifies the potential for its technology far beyond its ability to refresh (and re-instate copyright protection on) old recordings. For example, the company talks about transcribing scores from live recordings, making it easier for musicologists to study how performers developed their playing over their career.

Zenph has already collaborated with Sony Masterworks to release re-performances of Art Tatum, Sergei



RIGHT: Adapted Bösendorfer reproducer piano in Abbey Road Studio 2 showing the PC connection used for set-up and calibration of the instrument and the connections for the high-res datastream

Rachmaninoff and Glenn Gould [HFN Dec '08 and Yearbook 2009]. The Oscar Peterson recording – *Treasures From The Estate* – will be next in the series. So far, the releases have been favourably reviewed.

By using its proprietary methods, Zenph performance analysts claim to extract all of the pitch, timing and dynamic information from the most lo-fi of (typically piano) archive recordings. This is then used as an instruction set to play instruments and record them afresh.

Zenph is understandably cagey about the specific details of its technology. It confirms there is some automated software analysis at work, though company president John Q Walker is at pains to stress that a significant degree of human judgement is also involved.

Trained professional musicians listen to each original recording and,

by assessing the timbre of the notes played, can determine the acoustics of the room, the microphone locations and, from the changes in timbre of the notes played, determine the true dynamics of the original performance. The data set is then edited for the re-performance of the work, typically allocating a 3x10-bit resolution to describe the note down/up and 'touch'.

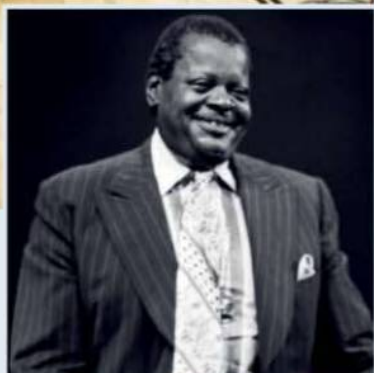
For solo piano, there are 12 points of analysis for each note played by the performer, defining its start time, pitch, duration, loudness, sustain, release and the characteristics of the damping applied. Interestingly, there are 50 points of analysis for each note played on a double bass, so the workload in re-creating jazz trio performances is much greater.

For many years, Yamaha's Disklavier Pro has set the standard

**ABBAY
ROAD NW8**

CITY OF WESTMINSTER

RIGHT: View of the studio floor from the control room, showing the forest of different microphone types and locations used, all of which provide options at the mixing stage



for reproducer pianos. However, Oscar Peterson played Bösendorfer pianos, so for authenticity a Bösendorfer Imperial concert grand was essential for this project. There are several specialists adapting Bösendorfer and Steinway pianos but Zenph identified Yorkshire-based Richard Shepherd's technology as the most suitable.

Shepherd is an enthusiastic retired engineer and music lover who developed control systems for steel-rolling mills and then precision flow-measurement and control systems for the oil industry. He has applied his engineering experience to the challenge of building a

reproducer piano that plays notes accurately in time and with the correct dynamics. However, it must also convey all the nuance and realism of the performance in how notes are sustained, with decay controlled by the appropriate use of the damper (pedal) control.

To understand how the reproducer piano works, it's worth recapping what actually happens when a piano note is played. A complicated wooden mechanism attached to the key moves the hammer towards the string. When the key is half way down, the damper above the string being played is lifted and, when the hammer is a millimetre away from the string, a trip mechanism launches it into free flight so that it bounces away from the string immediately after striking it. At some point, depending on how the pianist uses the damper pedals, the damper will move back into contact with the string.

Each stage of the note being played presents a different challenge for a solenoid operating the hammer. Pianos vary in the

stiffness of their mechanisms and, for each instrument, the mechanism stiffness also varies with humidity, so the reproducer mechanism must have the capability of fine adjustment and control.

RAISING THE FLAG

In Shepherd's reproducer, each hammer shank is fitted with a tiny aluminium flag etched with a fine optical slit. During the hammer's upward movement, the flag passes between an LED and a photocell, breaking its own light beam. This enables the hammer velocity to be measured just before the string

is struck. When playing notes softly, there must be sufficient velocity to overcome the resistance in the mechanism and for the hammer to be launched with enough momentum to reach and strike its string with the desired loudness.

There is a further complication: if the reproducer piano is called to play a soft note when the damper is already raised the solenoid will meet less resistance, so unless there is precise velocity control, with

'There are 12 points of analysis for each note'

ABOVE LEFT: New York-based piano technician Marc Wienert makes final adjustments to 'voice' the piano for the recording

ABOVE RIGHT: Richard Shepherd (left), designer and builder of the reproducer modifications, and Dr Anatoly Larkin of Zenph Systems who is responsible for the performance analysis of the Oscar Peterson recordings

INSET LEFT: Oscar Peterson himself – the Abbey Road sessions included re-performances of 'Body And Soul', 'Who Can I Turn To' and 'Old Folks'

INVESTIGATION

feedback, the note will over-strike and sound too loud.

Shepherd has ensured that his reproducer mechanism is capable of playing accurately and sensitively by designing a solenoid that uses a velocity control loop. A long neodymium magnet hangs below each solenoid and dips into a sensor coil, producing a voltage proportional to the shaft velocity.

Corrective adjustments can see 15A at 80V delivered by a switched-mode power amplifier over just a few milliseconds, generating considerable mechanical noise and heat within the solenoid. Off-the-shelf solenoids proved unsuitable so Shepherd's piano benefits from a bespoke solenoid design.

This solenoid has a unique bearing structure that restrains the plunger's sideways movement while allowing free axial motion. The bottom bearing is a small ring of Teflon with an outer soft silicone sleeve which holds the bearing in place and eliminates the sound of 'piston slap'. The top bearing shares the same construction.

RUNNING HOT

The solenoid's shaft is ground, polished and plated and in combination with the special bearing design ensures slick motion without using any lubrication (which would attract dust and increase friction). The dimensions of a piano limit the external form and size of the solenoids and, given the currents needed to power them, temperature control is also important. If the copper coil windings in the solenoids



were to increase in temperature, their resistance would rise so that a note played repeatedly might not play as loudly or consistently as directed by the playback file.

Shepherd addressed this by assembling the solenoids on a 10mm-thick machined aluminium plate. This acts as a heatsink while its high mass absorbs any residual mechanical noise. The plate is then rubber-mounted to the piano to isolate it from vibrations.

Shepherd's reproducer piano incorporates a self-calibrate mode that sends a control signal and uses the optical sensors to measure the resultant hammer velocity. It then adjusts the control signal until the correct velocity is attained. The sequence is repeated for a number of velocities and notes and the values stored as a look-up for the playing routine.

The control system also measures the time taken for the hammer to move from its rest position to the strike position at any hammer velocity.

This matters because a quiet note might take 200msec (0.2sec) for the hammer to arrive whereas a loud strike might take only 20msec.

The piano's control software accommodates these time variations by playing out of a one second cache memory.

This gives the software sufficient time to look ahead and determine the required velocities



and compensate on the fly for any differences by starting each solenoid movement accordingly. At the same time, the delays on the dampers are also accommodated.

In playing a loud note a large current will be applied to the solenoid to get it moving, which will

be backed off as the velocity loop senses the motion. When the velocity measuring flag signals that it has seen the hammer,

the solenoid current is reduced to a 'hold' current – sufficient to hold the note down. The hold current has to be small because the piano needs to release the note and get the damper onto the string at the right point to be ready for the next repeated note.

To ensure realism Shepherd has devoted considerable resources to ensuring that the pedal control is capable of replicating the demands for the damping of the strings. At its heart is a high accuracy position control on the damper tray, which lifts all the dampers up and down. ➔

TOP: Piano mechanism under modification in Richard Shepherd's workshop with close-up of his custom solenoid design below

'Off-the-shelf solenoids were unsuitable'



LEFT: The upright piano used by The Beatles on 'A Day In The Life' from the *Sgt Pepper* album. It is kept in Studio 2. Look carefully at the photograph of the studio floor at the top of p17 and it can be seen in the top lefthand corner

The servo must have enough bandwidth to reproduce a 'flutter pedal' – a movement analogous to a car's anti-lock braking system – to attenuate the vibration of the strings following a loud chord.

Replicating flutter pedalling calls for great accuracy and precision from the servo which has to ensure that the damper contacts the strings at the right time and velocity to provide the appropriate compression of the felts on the dampers. The speed at which the dampers move determines how far the felts compress and grab the strings, reducing the amplitude of their vibration. Shepherd's design is capable of fluttering at 10Hz completely silently. Considering the mass of the dampers (which incorporate lead weights) this is a significant engineering triumph.

THE TRUE TEST...

While the innovation of applying software to the analysis of musical performances is highly impressive and Richard Shepherd's evolution of the reproducer piano moves the game forward, the true test is how the music actually sounds.

I have witnessed many recording sessions, however, this one was quite unique for not having the performer physically present. Usually so much of the preparatory work is aimed at getting the musicians comfortable, in the groove, ready to perform at their best. Typically, extended jams are followed by critical listening to the recorded sound in the control room, until a consensus forms that it's time to start recording tracks. For this project, a perfect performance already existed on the laptop's hard drive – the challenge was all on the technicians to capture the recital as best they could.

Understandably, the tension was palpable. Piano voicer Marc Wienert checked and re-checked the tuning of the magnificent Bösendorfer, making minute adjustments to string tension whilst performance analyst Anatoly Larkin experimented with fine adjustments to the hammer velocity settings. It was reminiscent of the nervous minutes before a major exam, as the candidates anxiously read through their revision notes one final time.

In the control room, producer David Lai and Abbey Road engineer



TOP: Recording engineer and classical music specialist Arne Akselberg monitors levels during set-up

ABOVE LEFT: Obsolete analogue equipment retired from the studios is on display in the corridor of Abbey Road studios, such as this mixing desk and tape machine

ABOVE RIGHT: Current studio technology is 24-bit/96kHz with 5.1 surround capability

Arne Akselberg conferred, fading up the different microphone options on the mixing desk, comparing the natural reverb with each option. Through the control room monitors, listening to 'Who Can I Turn To?' (a tune recorded several times by Oscar Peterson) was an uncanny experience, knowing that this fresh-sounding performance dated back 30 years, yet with very modern clarity and dynamics.

Taking advantage of the near-perfect recording environment with its absence of ambient noise, and the wide dynamic range of the digital medium, Lai was able to record Peterson's expressive playing without resorting to compression. For perhaps the first time, listeners will hear the expressiveness in Peterson's playing uncompromised by either the background bustle of a live audience or any limitations in the recording technology.

Compared with legacy recordings, the sound quality of the piano was more open and airy – the harmonics sparkling, particularly in the upper octaves. The lower registers were full and tight, loaded with palpable heft and rhythmic agility. However, underpinning every tune performed at the session was a subliminal perception of greater

realism – of being presented a rich and vibrant sonic panorama, as if actually being there, not looking at a small, blurry snapshot of an event in the past.

Abbey Road's Studio 2 is a vast space, resembling the rather scruffy old gym of a Victorian school building. On the floor, near the piano whilst it played, the overriding impression was just how loud a concert grand piano sounds when played by a virtuoso.

The technicians, engrossed in their perfectionist tasks, appeared almost indifferent to the remarkable improvisations

emanating from the Bösendorfer: the extreme contrasts between the visceral power and the delicacy in dynamics; those incredibly rapid runs and the nuanced timing in the sustains, pauses and spaces between the notes of Oscar Peterson's posthumous playing.

Standing beside the piano, watching the keys' ghostly movements, it emphasised how much of the performance is missing when playing the records or videos and how great it would have been to have seen Oscar Peterson play live. Sadly, that's no longer an option, however, there is no mistaking – this was a very close encounter. ☺

'The true test is how the music sounds'



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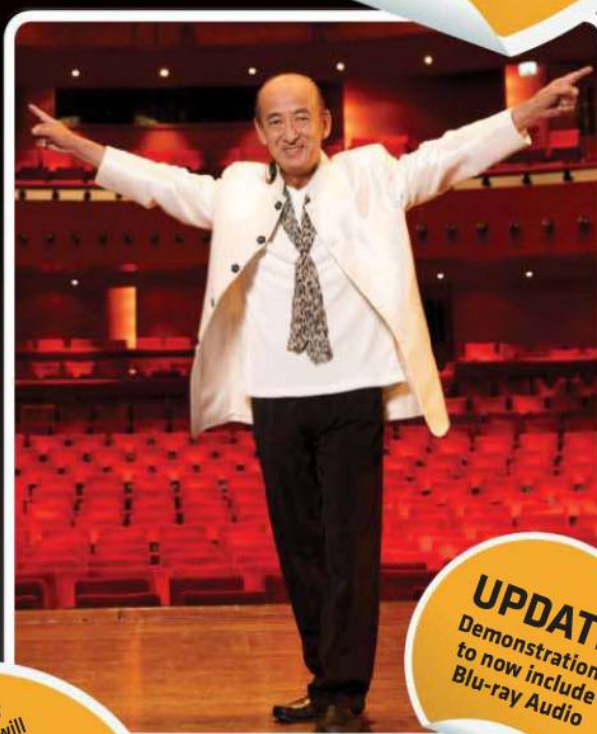
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KTRLab 5725/845 eVolution (£2579)/ (£6009)

French manufacturer KTRLab sent us its flagship combination, with the noble 845 valve providing the power. Can French triodes challenge Italy, Switzerland and Japan?
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Over 20 years have passed since I was this frightened by hi-fi equipment. Aside from seeing EAR's Tim De Paravicini prodding live units with an unshielded metal probe, and not counting the prehistoric Williamson I auditioned a while back, the last time I actually worried about switching on an amp was when I stood in front of a Futterman Output Transformerless amp. The late, much missed Harvey Rosenberg assured me I wouldn't be singed or shocked, let alone fried or roasted. The KTRLab 845 had the same effect on me.

It's not that I'm unfamiliar with 845-based valve amps. I adore the Unison Research Absolute 845 integrated and Simply 845, the Nagra VPA, amps with the closely-related 211, like the Air-Tight ATM-211, and others with tubes the size of Morrison & Schiff all-beef salamis. And I've had more 'extreme' equipment in my home than a man with my IQ should entertain. But the KTRLab came with so many warnings that, despite the excellent fit and finish, I felt nothing less than a case of nerves.

AMPLE AMPS

Both the KTRLab 845 stereo power amp and the 5725 preamp, from its eVolution series, share an ample footprint of 450x400mm. The preamplifier stands 180mm tall, the 845 adds another 330mm if you stack them – and they were designed to complement each other this way.

On the top of the amplifier are the mighty 845s that give the unit its name, with two Marconi 6SN7 and two National Union 6SL7GT 'NOS' ('new-old-stock') valves in front. Between the valves are

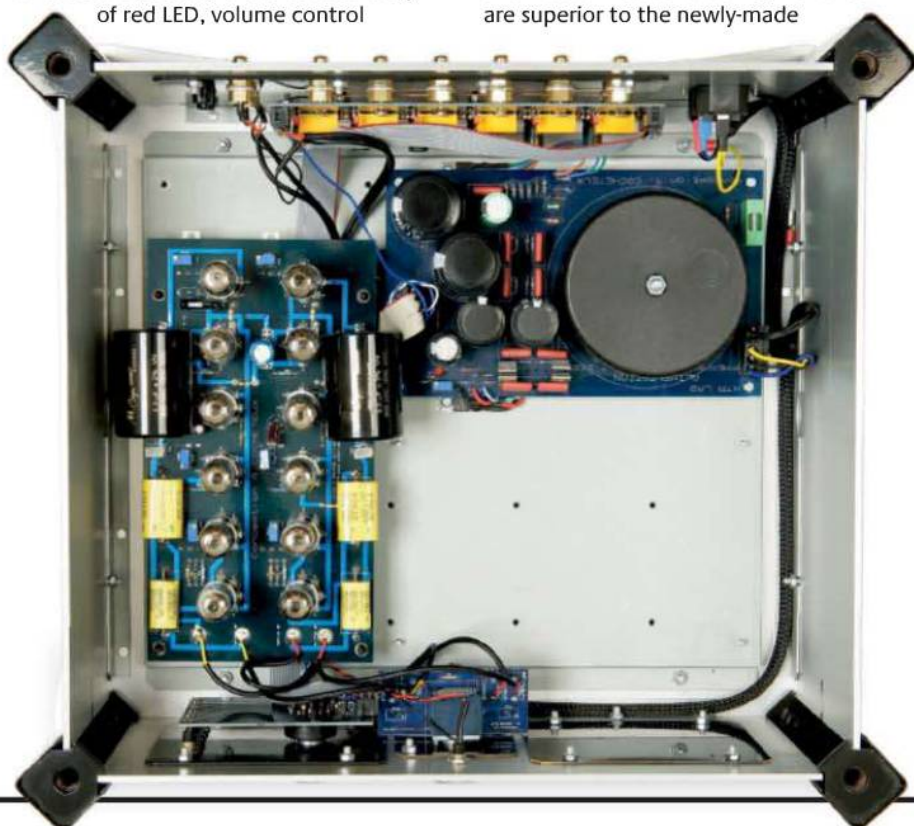
two knobs that control the current strength, for adjusting the bias.

Lower your eyes to the front of the 845, and you'll see a volume control flanked by the meters, by which you set the levels via top rotaries. The presence of a volume control means that you could use the 845 without a preamp, feeding a line level source into its input sockets and controlling playback volume from the front. Also on the 845 is a red LED to indicate on/off status. It takes some time before this comes on after first switching the power-on rocker below the volume control. It glows once it stabilises, but you'll know that the power is on before it illuminates, because you'll see the 845s glowing.

Mirrored precisely on the front panel of the 5725 preamp is the vertical array of red LED, volume control

and power-on rocker. To its left are six red lights that illuminate the choice of source, selected by the adjacent knob. Although all of line level, there's an input labelled 'vinyl', as well as SACD, CD, Aux 1 and 2, and FM. At the back, just the necessities: IEC mains inputs, phono sockets for the line inputs and preamp out, while the power amp offers phono input and sufficient speaker terminals for either 4 or 8ohm connections.

KTRLab does offer slight variations to the customer, the review amp sporting superior French-made Millerioux output transformers, while a Japanese-made transformer is available for £860 less. And UK distributor Colin Sinclair explained that, 'We can fit NOS 845s for a king's ransom.' This will appeal to those who swear that original 845s are superior to the newly-made



RIGHT: All-valve – a dozen 5725s – and minimalist, the line-level eVolution separates preamp from PSU onto two motherboards. Components are top quality, signal paths short



LEFT: Red LEDs indicate source and power-on on the preamp, power-on on the amplifier. You'll need to keep an eye on those bias meters; alas, they're not illuminated

And even operating the 845 was accompanied by a caveat: 'Ken, the bias circuit suffers a bit of hysteresis. Turn the top-mounted knobs cautiously and wait a while for the needles to react. And never let the bias current drift up to 120mA.' Finally, when he suggested I refrain from leaving this large and very hot combination unattended for extended periods, I figured that I was in for a long and disciplined listening session.

Despite any indication of the amplifier's power rating – Paul posited 'a genuine 10W' – I had no trouble driving the Tannoy Mini Autographs, the PMC DB1+ and even a sweet burst through the Wilson Sophia 2s. Sources included the Linn LP12/Ekos/Arkiv analogue front end via Audio Research PH5, and the Marantz CD-12/DA-12 and Musical Fidelity KW25 CD players, connected with Kimber and Yter cables. I also inserted my resident Audio Research REF 5 preamp into the mix.

FREE AND WILLING

Auditioning the KTRs proved exciting to say the least, if only because they confounded me. One minute, there'd be an inexplicable low-level hum, the next I'd be savouring transparency so clean and clear that it was hard to imagine how such a signal traversed so many valves, especially of such elderly vintage.

Considering that the 845Bs [see boxout, below] were the only valves in the chain that were 'new-stock', KTRLab has done a remarkable job of

845B POWER TRIODE

Much loved by triode addicts, especially those who can't abide the 300B, the 845 dates back to 1931, first used by RCA for their AM radio transmitters. KTRLab uses the 845B, a modern, Chinese-made version from Shuguang, said to be inspired by Amperex's 845s of the 1940s. Differences include the absence of the mica bridge bracing the plate structure braced against the glass, the 'B' using posts anchored in the valve base, while the 'B' also uses a copper base instead of the brass base found on period versions. Just make sure that it can breathe.

versions. While we're discussing tubes, the preamp is filled with a dozen NOS Thompson CSF-made 5725 tubes from the 1980s, as used in the radar systems in Mirage jets.

It's interesting to note that, my yellow steak aside, all KTRLab equipment 'carries lifetime warranty, except for the valves which are normally 12 months.' Reassuring though this may be, the thrumming and the dimming of the room lights and other dramatic moments undermine any false sense of security an eternal guarantee might promise. It's the routine that you follow which encourages trepidation.

First, you switch on the preamp and let it warm up five minutes. No issue here: it's good practice to switch on preamps first, then power amps,

while switching off in the reverse order, just in case of damaging thumps.

After the preamp stabilises, you then switch on the power amp, followed by adjusting the knobs on top to get the milli-ammeters to read '100'. According to KTRLab, 'reproduction improves

for some 15 or 20 minutes as the units warm up.' Again, no issue there.

However, Editor Miller tested and even hand-delivered these units before providing a running

dialogue of cautions. He suggested that the meter readings were crucial. He warned against switching the amps off and back on again too quickly. Each time we inserted a new source component, even when we knew the inputs weren't selected, he double-checked to make certain the volume was wa-a-ay down.

'KTRLab has done a remarkable job of working with aged tubes'

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER

working with aged tubes. Of course, power was always going to be an issue, and one suspects that buyers of this system will use it to drive ultra-high-efficiency horns, say better than 95dB/1W. That aside, I had no problems whatsoever in savouring the full bass strength of both the vinyl and the CD of Keb' Mo's *Peace... Back by Popular Demand*. It was nowhere near as soft as one might have expected it to be at the extremes, given the origins of the tubes. Meanwhile, the bass flowed in lush waves, a gentle, lilting sound that drove me to dig out John Lennon's 'Borrowed Time', Mike Nesmith's 'Rio' and anything that would encourage me to use the word 'loping'. The KTRs certainly sounded free and willing.

QUITE A FEAT

Which, naturally, led me to Little Feat, that self-same song – 'Willing' – heard in both their version and Linda Ronstadt's. Far be it for me to suggest that the French have an affinity for laidback, Left Coast, country-flavoured rock, but the KTRs favoured the genre much in the same way that horns favour John Philip Sousa and Cerwin-Vegas were just made for hip-hop. The elusive warmth of valves, which transistor addicts would describe as 'imaginary', manifested itself in the vocals, from the aforementioned Keb' Mo's, with its richness, to the near-gravel of Lowell George, to the Angenieux-lens clarity of Ms Ronstadt's.

'Caress' is the word, with all the Gallic romance it implies. It placed the music on a pedestal, yet, at the same time, it did not flatter an inferior recording. A recent collection of bluegrass classics, all from 1950-1956 and mono to boot sounded as nasal and thin and twangy through the KTRs as they did in my car system or through LS3/5As. In this respect, I was reminded of the Nagras, though the Swiss application of 845s – and, for that matter, the Japanese – tips the balance to greater clarity and detail.

Here, the French more closely resemble their Italian neighbours who, unlike the Swiss or the Japanese, respect their Latinate origins and their reputations (deserved or otherwise) as great lovers. The KTRs possess a romance that almost makes you blush. Doris Day's heart-rending take of 'At Last', Acoustic Sounds' phenomenal reissues on SACD and vinyl of Nat 'King' Cole's *Love Is The Thing* and a cluster of tracks by Alison Krauss revealed another tendency, or even prejudice, born of the KTRs.

If soft-rock and mild funk bring out virtues in the KTR package, then vocals allow them to flourish. The naturalness in textures ranging from glassine distaff country warblers to boldly-textured voices such as Tom Waits' and Dr. John's was ear-opening, repeatedly providing flashes of utter authenticity that were compromised only by mild dynamic constraints. It gets back to the power limitations. Trouble is, trading regular speakers for horns may only give you added level at the cost of subtlety.

Once I swapped the KTR preamp for the REF 5, everything changed. It was as if I had unharnessed the 845, the revelation being that the 5725 preamp, while certainly worth every penny of its £2500 or so price tag, was not in the same league as the 845. A level of haze that I hadn't been able to identify

suddenly vanished. It was like looking through a Lalique bowl, then replacing it with the aforementioned Angenieux optics, removing the artfully applied frost – and I'd kill to own any piece of Lalique – for an ultrasonic cleaning.

Blessedly, the REF 5 added nothing untoward, as I expected. Alas, that preamp costs more than both KTRs combined. But such are the realities of high-end audio, when everything is performing according to reputation, price, pedigree or whatever other

measure you might care to apply. The change of preamp revealed one other gain that would have otherwise escaped me: the 854 power has greater spatial capabilities that the 5725 can expose.

With lean recordings, especially the Keb' Mo' tracks with fewer players, the a capella of the Persuasions, and even the bleak 'Ode To Billy Joe', the 5725-plus-845 produced an airy and wide soundstage, with acceptable depth and convincing height. Changing to the REF 5 provided an expansion of what must equate to a genuine 20%. Wider by a touch, taller by a hair, but much deeper, enough to kick out the back wall. And the added depth seemed to complement the other two dimensions.

WALL OF SOUND

As psychoacoustics is not a field I've studied,

I can't say how much of that is genuine, nor how much is wishful thinking. Regardless, the overall impression was of a much larger-sounding system – and this was detectable even through the teensy Tannoys. Turning to works of physical majesty, like the J Geils Band's 'I Can't Believe You', the 845 rose to the occasion, creating a wall of sound worthy of even some far-mightier solid-state powerhouses. The mass necessary to convey the grandeur of that track, with the Geils rhythm section adding a

'Bass on Keb' Mo flowed in lush waves, a gentle lilting sound...'

THE HEART OF KTR

Although I'd seen KTRLab's displays at numerous Paris hi-fi shows, I had yet to sit down and listen to the stuff, nor had I tried to translate their embarrassingly sparse literature. Nowhere could I even find an output power rating. UK importer Colin Sinclair explained that founder André Cocheteux [pictured right] was a radio ham who 'made his money elsewhere' but got into audio because he was a member of a French society formed to come up with new electronics ideas.

Andre was inspired by the Keiber Totem Regulated Multi-stage Circuit, hence 'KTR', from work by Keiber at MIT in 1943, originally directed at the accuracy of long range gunners. It appealed to Cocheteux as it eliminates a need for capacitors and resistors, while the clever use of this multistage circuit enables the audio signal to



pass only through the valves. After producing kits sold in France, and after acquiring huge numbers of new-old-stock valves, Andre was driven by popular demand to apply it to a range of fully-constructed models.

The company also manufactures loudspeakers, solid-state components and cables, covering a wide price span. But one thing's for certain: the 845-based models are the heart of KTR.

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LAB REPORT

KTRLAB 5725/845 EVO. (£2579/£6009)

While these amplifiers are accompanied by dire warnings over maintaining the idealised bias current (100mA) and thermal shock (caused by switching the 845 off/on) neither unit possesses the most elementary of specifications. Datasheets from the 1930s suggest it's possible to squeeze some 20W from a single-ended 845 power triode at 5% 2nd harmonic distortion, but KTRLab's implementation (using the newer 845B triodes) offers just 2x15W/8ohm and 2x13W/4ohm at 5% THD through the requisite 8/4ohm taps. This and the high ~6.5ohm output impedance (8ohm tap) suggests very sensitive and relatively high impedance (horn) loudspeakers are a must.

Into a benign 8ohm load, the 845 offers good bass extension (-0.3dB/20Hz) with a 'relatively low' 6% THD at a subsonic 5Hz. Over the first few watts, distortion hovers between 1-2% over the audio range [see blue infill, Graph 2 below]. This increases with power, reaching 5% at 15W and 10% at 20W/8ohm [see Graph 1, below] – more 'colorful' than the vast majority of well-designed loudspeakers. The 5725 preamp is arguably the weaker of the pair for while distortion is lower at 0.02–0.05% [black trace, Graph 2], it offers a poorer 76dB A-wtd S/N ratio and suffers from a mismatch in output impedance – a usefully low 230ohm on the left channel but a higher 1.68kohm on the right. The impedance of the volume control also results in swings in response, the 'smoothest' HF roll-off achieved at the 12 o'clock position. Readers may view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for the KTRLab 5725/845 EVO pre/power amps by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Connections are straightforward, with good quality sockets and speaker terminals. Latter provide for 4 or 8ohm connections. Note spike feet to secure power amp to pre, and floor protectors

powerful, stomping background, is denied by far too many systems. The KTR dispatched it with ease.

All was not bliss, however. The occasional buzz or hiss would intrude, possibly from one of the 845s, equally likely from any one of the other valves. The system was just as critical of being on for too long as it was of not being warmed up enough. But that may be irrelevant for many of you, especially those who actually place a value on cranky equipment that needs coddling.

EXCUSE MY FRENCH

Here the Francophobe in me surfaces. If hi-fi components reflect the personalities of their designers, and their countries of origin, these are even more French than Bruni and Sarkozy. They possess every anthropomorphic trait one could apply to a concoction of wires and valves. They're overly emotional, yet occasionally insouciant. They can sound sexy, or aloof. And that's independent of the music.

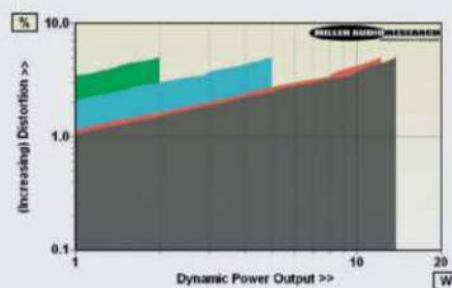
But most of the time, they're consistent, the remarks preceding the above paragraph referring to their overall comportment.

As for the KTRs being self-centred, untrustworthy, pseudo-intellectual, arrogant and cowardly, well, that will require a few more months of careful auditioning. And suspension of disbelief. ☺

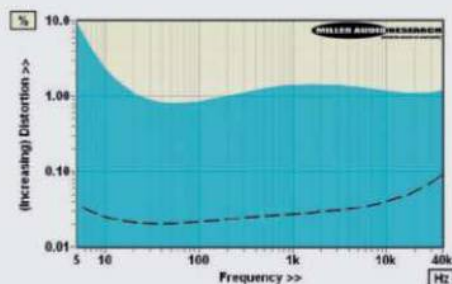
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Some might find it astonishing this late into the heavily-regulated era of CE testing and EU paranoia [see p94] that such unruly, downright ornery gear is still being made. In that sense, the KTR products are throwbacks to the 1980s, while the sound is – blessedly – late 1950s. This pair is strictly for the sort who finds maintaining a Lancia Fulvia not to be an inconvenience. Only the brave need apply.

Sound Quality: 79%



ABOVE: Dynamic output vs. distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) loads. Extrapolates to 20W/8ohm at 10% THD



ABOVE: Distortion versus extended 5Hz-40kHz frequency, 5725 preamp (1V out, black dashed trace) and 845 power amp (1W/8ohm, blue infill)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<5% THD, 8/4ohm)	15W / 13W
Dynamic power (<5% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	14W / 12W / 5W / 2W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	5.9–6.8ohm (5725; 1.7kohm)
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	–0.2 to –5.0dB/+0.0 to –14.7dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/10W)	355mV / 1160mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (pre/power)	76.3dB (0dBV) / 94.0dB (0dBW)
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, pre/power)	0.02–0.05% / 1.1–1.5%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	428W/441W (5725; 42W)
Dimensions (WHD, pre/power)	450x180x400/440x520x400mm

KEF Reference 207/2 (£10,000)

The supertweeter has gone, but is the second iteration of KEF's 207 its most perfect real-world speaker ever?
Review & Lab: **Keith Howard**

Short of the company's monumental Muon – the last few samples of which have shot up in price to £140,000 per pair since we reviewed it [*HFN* May '08] – this is KEF's top loudspeaker. At £10k a brace it's hardly cheap but in the grand scheme of expensive loudspeakers it rates as positively cut-price, although you can up the ante to £14k if so inclined by specifying high-gloss American walnut, piano black or cherry finishes. The same veneers are available in the standard satin finish, together with black and the pictured sycamore.

It arrives in such massive boxes that you expect the Reference 207/2 to be a room-dominating menhir but it wears its bulk – it's over 1.2m high, 400mm deep and weighs 66kg – surprisingly lightly. It is also simply, cleanly, unfussily styled, which helps it merge into its surroundings rather than insist on your undivided attention.

A five-driver, four-way design the R207/2 melds twin 250mm, reflex-loaded woofers with a 250mm lower-midrange driver, 165mm upper-midrange unit and 25mm titanium dome tweeter, the last two being combined in KEF's familiar Uni-Q array where the tweeter replaces the dust cap of the upper-mid driver whose cone doubles as a short horn for it.

This coaxial arrangement ensures that directivity doesn't suffer a step-change through crossover, avoiding the coloration of early reflections and room reverberant sound that can otherwise result. Crossover frequencies are 120Hz, 350Hz and 2.3kHz, the large diameter lower-mid

driver ensuring that high sound pressure levels are achievable with low distortion. Weaving these drivers together is a complex, hand-soldered, fourth-order crossover that includes conjugate load matching to make the R207/2 an easier load to drive given its 4ohm nominal impedance.

The crossover is split into three, with each section addressable via a separate pair of speaker terminals so that the speaker can be bi-wired/bi-amped or tri-wired/tri-amped as desired. This being a four-way speaker, it follows that two of the frequency bands are conjoined, the upper terminals connecting to the tweeter

high-pass section, the bottom terminals to the bass low-pass section, and the middle terminals to the bandpass sections of the lower- and upper-midrange units. For single-wire use, two pairs of linking wires

are supplied per speaker rather than linking bars, terminated in a spade connector at one end and 4mm plug at the other.

ADJUSTING THE BALANCE

Above the terminals are threaded sockets for screw-in caps that can be used to adjust the R207/2's tonal balance according to the environment in which it's used. Removing the cap marked 'LF' introduces a 2dB shelf-down below 300Hz for when the speaker is used close to a wall.

For the HF cap there are two positions and hence four available treble responses according to whether both caps, one cap or no caps are fitted, nominally 'flat', '+0.75dB', '-0.75dB' and '-1.5dB'.

'Dynamics and pizzazz stirred into an ample soundstage'

RIGHT: Reference 207/2 is a five-driver, four-way design with twin paralleled bass units. Uni-Q array atop and the intersecting reflex port low down leave no doubt that this is a KEF



DIVIDE AND RULE

Melanie Safka's wry observation that a thing is a phallic symbol if it's longer than it's wide lumps speaker cabinets and organ pipes into the same category – and for good acoustic reasons as well as tenuous psychoanalytical ones. Organ pipes are the shape they are to encourage resonance of the enclosed air at a succession of harmonically related frequencies, in a broadly analogous manner to a stretched violin or guitar string. The tall, narrow loudspeaker cabinets typical of floorstanding models tend to behave in a similar way, with a dominant internal resonance due to the length mode of the enclosed air. A simple way to suppress this so-called 'organ pipe' resonance, as KEF does in the R207/2, is by subdividing the cabinet so that each bass driver has its own enclosure. This also has the benefit of bracing the cabinet walls.

A speaker this heavy takes some moving about so KEF supplies small metal castors for hard floors – really hard floors, that is, since wood floors are likely to be dented rather badly given the contact pressures at each castor wheel. When you've settled on the optimum position for the speakers you can then fit substantial chromed feet if you prefer.

For carpets KEF supplies spikes, which should only be fitted once positioning is decided because moving the speakers thereafter is difficult. Sliding the unspiked cabinets or 'walking' them on a carpeted floor is easy enough.

HEAD TO TOE

KEF recommends that all its Uni-Q speakers are used with little if any toe-in towards the listening position, which – sorry if you tire of hearing me say this – has the effect (advantage, I'd claim) of reducing spectral disparities between the direct sound and first sidewall reflection.


The instruction manual says nothing of recommended listening height, although the axis of the lower-midrange driver appears to be the intended listening axis. I measured the R207/2 on the tweeter axis instead, which proved fortuitous because I preferred the sound on this axis even though it required me to use a booster cushion on the hot seat.

Initial experimentation also revealed that, true to KEF's instructions, the R207/2s worked best in my room when only slightly toed-in from the straight ahead position. As usually happens when a speaker's able to adopt this alignment without sounding too dulled in the treble, the sound

expanded both spatially and dynamically compared with the result when pointed at the listening seat. This difference will be most clearly heard if you have hard, reflective, flat side walls – less so if there are diffracting bookshelves in the way or if, perish the thought, you've been misled into putting sound absorbent materials there.

Next I played with the tonal balance adjustments, wondering if these might counteract my initial reaction that the sound was lacking a little in precision and insight. Half an hour later I'd decided to stick with the flat settings. Yes, the tonal adjustments made a difference – of course they did. But however attractive some initially seemed on a particular track it soon became apparent that there was a spectral imbalance at work, spoiling the inherently neutral balance that is one of the R207/2's hallmarks.

This might not be the case in either a very live room or a very dead one, where some treble toning down or perking up could be beneficial. But in my 'live bottom, dead top' listening room – where absorbents for the control of reverberation time are all mounted high on the walls where they don't interfere with the important early reflections – the R207/2's native tonal balance was best.

No suppression of the low frequency output was required as the R207/2s were used away from the walls and have an inherently well controlled, tuneful bass that not all reflex loaded speakers succeed in emulating. Sensibly, KEF seems not to have striven for the ultimate in bass extension, preferring instead to avoid the risk of LF excess and/or poor transient response clouding the sound in typical listening rooms. 



LOUDSPEAKER

LAB REPORT

KEF REFERENCE 207/2 (£10,000)

KEF claims a sensitivity of 91dB for the R207/2, just a little above the 90.3dB we measured for pink noise input. Frequency response errors, measured at 1m on the tweeter axis, were moderate at ± 3.9 dB for both speakers and pair matching was good at ± 0.9 dB. Both these figures are for a lower limit of 400Hz rather than the usual 200Hz because of the impracticality of raising the R207/2 off the floor – so discount the apparent falling away of output below 400Hz. The response trend is flat up to 15kHz and although the ultrasonic response is ragged, output is maintained to above 40kHz [see Graph 1, below]. Diffraction-corrected near-field measurement showed bass extension good to 39Hz (-6 dB re. 200Hz).

The graph of impedance modulus versus frequency (not shown) confirms that the R207/2's crossover incorporates conjugate load matching to remove all the peaks you'd expect, except that associated with the tweeter at around 2.8kHz. CLM also ensures that the impedance phase angles are well controlled below 1kHz, above which the highest and lowest values occur, again associated with the tweeter's fundamental resonance. As a result the minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) drops to 1.8ohm but at a high 6.7kHz. Probably more significant is the 2.0ohm value at 239Hz, which confirms that the R207/2 is a good deal easier to drive than some competitors. At 0.2%, total harmonic distortion is unusually low at 90dB SPL at 100Hz. While the cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2] reveals little in the way of distinct resonant ridges, there is a marked change in decay rate at the crossover of upper-mid driver and tweeter. KH



ABOVE: The crossover is split three ways to allow bi-wiring/bi-amping or tri-wiring. Bass and treble balance are both adjustable using threaded inserts

What proved to be the key to extracting the best from the R207/2s was bi-amping. Connecting two of my Exposure XVIII Monos to drive the bass section of each speaker and another two to drive the midrange and treble sections cut through the slight but unshakable sense of a less than luminous midrange that had persisted with the single-wire connection (using Townshend Isolda cables throughout).

Suddenly the trumpet sound in Jimmy Cobb's 'I Had The Craziest Dream' (from *In The Key Of Blue*, a 24/96 Chesky download from HDtracks) had a 'live' edge to it that had been missing before, and the opening drum beat gained a new tactility that made me restart the track a couple of times in surprise.

ON SONG

Now the R207/2 was starting to sound like a £10,000 loudspeaker should, with dynamics and pizzazz stirred into its ample soundstage, an even tonal balance and effortless ability to play loud.

Large loudspeakers are often good at large sounds – and the R207/2 duly sailed through diverse 'big' material from Eric Clapton's 'Double Trouble' (*Just One Night*, Polydor 531 827-2) to

Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* [Classic Records DAD 1004], both played at unsociable levels – but less so at reproducing small musical forces with equal aplomb.

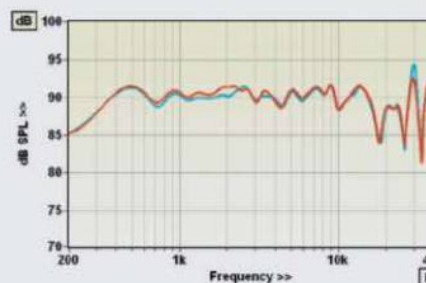
Not so the R207/2 which dealt delicately and insightfully with two vocal tracks I habitually use to assess this aspect of performance, James Griffett singing English folk song 'The Turtle Dove' [Regis RRC1112] and Ella Fitzgerald caressing 'Reach For Tomorrow' [Verve 839 838-2].

Perhaps no loudspeaker will ever be the perfect all-rounder but the R207/2 comes tantalisingly close. ⚡

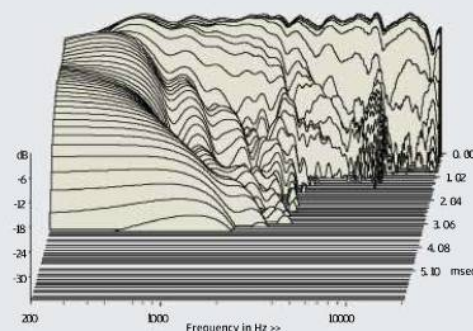
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

You get a lot for your money with the Reference 207/2, and not just physically – it delivers fine sound over the gamut of musical genres. Tuneful bass and prodigious output capability suit it to rock music while its even tonal balance and spacious soundstage suit it to classical material just as well. If it lacks anything it's midrange transparency of the topmost order but bi-amping can get you a vital closer to realising it.

Sound Quality: 88%



ABOVE: KEF's forward response is impressively flat even if its ultrasonic output is a little ragged

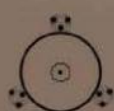


ABOVE: No obvious driver or cabinet resonances but note the change in decay rate above ~4kHz

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.9dB/90.3dB/90.4dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.3ohm @ 204Hz 20.5ohm @ 2.9kHz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-41° @ 3.9kHz 43° @ 1.9kHz
Pair matching (400Hz–20kHz)	± 0.9 dB
LF/HF extension (-6 dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	39Hz / >40 kHz/ >40 kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.2% / 0.2% / $<0.1\%$
Dimensions (HWD)	1226x400x685mm

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Clearaudio Innovation Compact (£4250 w/o arm)

If the company's £6k Innovation deck grabbed your eye then this compact version offers a host of the original's innovative features at a heady cost saving

Review: **John Bamford** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Considerably cheaper than the company's £5930 Innovation turntable that we tested last year [*HFN* Sep '09] this Innovation Compact model looks no less purposeful. For a start, it features the same 70mm-thick platter made of polyoxymethylene (POM) that DuPont markets under the trade name Delrin. It also employs Clearaudio's patented Ceramic Magnetic Bearing and the same Optical Speed Control system used in the imposing Innovation deck. However, the Compact is just under half the weight of its bigger brother due largely to its less elaborate chassis construction.

As described in our review of the Innovation, the sandwich construction of the solid chassis is elegantly curved and looks fabulous in the flesh thanks to the polished metal edges and high-gloss acrylic finish. Where the massive Innovation features three sandwich layers this Compact employs a single sandwich and dispenses with the additional 15mm-thick stainless steel sub platter. Consequently, while occupying an identical footprint, the Innovation Compact weighs just 12kg all-in, compared with almost 25kg for the 84mm-taller Innovation.

AN EYE ON SPEED

For those who didn't see last year's September review of the Innovation turntable a few words about Clearaudio's Optical Speed Control (OSC) system are in order. An upwards-facing infrared light and sensor are mounted on the deck's chassis near the centre bearing which reads a reflective calibrated scale on the underside of the platter to monitor the speed of rotation. An electronic circuit uses

feedback to govern the deck's 24V DC motor and correct for any speed drift [see Lab Report, p35].

Meanwhile, the proprietary bearing is an inverted type with a non-magnetic ceramic bearing shaft integral with the Delrin platter, the weight of the platter supported by the mutual repulsion of opposing magnet rings positioned on the chassis and the underside of the platter. A round section belt drives the periphery of the platter while the motor housing that comprises the most forward-facing of the deck's three 'pillars' has four buttons on its top surface for 33, 45 and 78rpm operation, and Off.

Hidden to the rear of the motor housing are recessed trim pots for fine adjustment of each speed during set up, Clearaudio supplying everything required to get you up and running including a little aluminium screwdriver to fit the trim pots, a strobe disc, Allen keys for arm board and arm installation and a pair of white gloves!

Levelling the turntable is simplicity itself, the deck's chassis having three downward-facing spikes that sit on 10p coin-sized metal discs with centre indents to protect furniture surfaces. The spikes have finger-tight locking 'wheels' that are first loosened to allow rotation of the threaded spikes for precise levelling and then retightened. A 'bubble' level gauge is included with the turntable package, and a spare belt for the deck too by the way – a most thoughtful touch. Setting up this deck is indeed a doddle.

TWO ARMS...

Arm boards for both the Innovation and Innovation Compact are fashioned from billets of aluminium and are fitted in a matter of seconds, secured with a couple of Allen bolts. Note that you can fit two arms if you wish, one in the conventional position and one on the deck's third 'pillar' at the rear. As the turntable includes 78rpm operation this will be of particular



RIGHT: The Universal is Clearaudio's top pivoted arm design, with carbon fibre arm tube, magnetic anti-skating arrangement and a range of counterweights to balance most cartridges



ABOVE: Speed switching is electronic, operated via push buttons situated on top of the motor/drive pulley housing at the front of the deck. The deck offers 78rpm too

interest to anyone owning a collection of vintage 78s, as fitting a second arm/cartridge obviates the need to swap cartridge/styli in order to play them.

The tonearm fitted to our Innovation Compact is the same Universal model that we saw when testing the big Innovation deck last September, albeit this time without its optional VTA adjuster that provides fine-tuning of a cartridge's vertical tracking angle on-the-fly.

Introduced by Clearaudio last year, the Universal is the company's top radial/pivoted design (Clearaudio being renowned for its elaborate tangential/parallel-trackers) that uses miniature ballraces for its horizontal and vertical bearings. Its arm tube is made of carbon fibre, with differing diameters along its length designed to dissipate resonance.

While at first glance the headshell may appear fixed it is in fact secured

with a small Allen bolt, thereby allowing adjustment of cartridge azimuth as well as painless cartridge swapping. Anti-skating is magnetic, adjusted by a thumbwheel at the side of the bearing housing, while downforce is similarly adjusted by a thumbwheel at the rear that moves the threaded counterweight fore and aft.

Four sizes of counterweight are supplied with the Universal arm to make it – ahem – universally suitable for a range of cartridges weighing anywhere from 2.9g to 22.1g. Price is pretty steep at £3110 but it's a work of art. Add £390 for the version fitted with the VTA adjuster.

TUNED TO TASTE


For listening I used Ortofon's Cadenza Blue cartridge with ruby cantilever (£1000) together with the splendidly transparent Sensor Prelude phono stage made by RCM Audio. This was hooked up to my Mark Levinson No.383 amplifier.

And what a lot of listening I did, first auditioning the deck with the Universal arm as supplied, then later removing the arm in order to use the turntable for listening to the six tonearms we tested as a group in the June '10 issue... before

'Bass lines were firm and taut with commensurately powerful punch'

before in these pages: the sound of a record player is governed by the marriage of turntable, arm and cartridge. So while the Innovation Compact can sound delicate and refined as featured

here – fitted with the company's expensive Universal arm – partnered with an SME Series IV tonearm (£1495) for example and it can sound extremely full-blooded with subjectively stronger, more powerful bass reproduction. Swap this with Linn Products' considerably less costly Akito arm (£795) and you have a sound that is bold and vibrant, with surprisingly tuneful and ebullient bass. You only have to see the results of our comprehensive tonearm group test [*HFN* June '10] to see the wide variation of subjective tonal colours delivered by the Innovation Compact when fitted with various arms and the same Ortofon MC cartridge used here.

With the Universal arm supplied, tonally the presentation is a little 'dark' and arguably might prove a little laidback for some tastes. Listening to the title track from Miles Davis' 1986 *Tutu* LP [Warner 925 490-1] for instance, the deep bass 

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Founded by German designer Peter Suchy and situated in Erlangen, a couple of hours' drive north of Munich, Clearaudio came on the scene with a range of MC cartridges in 1978. More than three decades on, the company is very much a family affair with Peter Suchy's sons Patrick and Robert heading up purchasing/construction and marketing/export sales respectively, and his daughter Veronika running business operations and the company's HR department. It's a substantial manufacturing operation today. The product portfolio includes amplifiers, mains conditioners and record cleaning machines in addition to record players, its awesome flagship Statement model topping £100k when fitted with the Statement TT1 tangential tonearm and £8000 Goldfinger V2 MC. Everything is made in-house by Clearaudio, including its hand-built cartridges.

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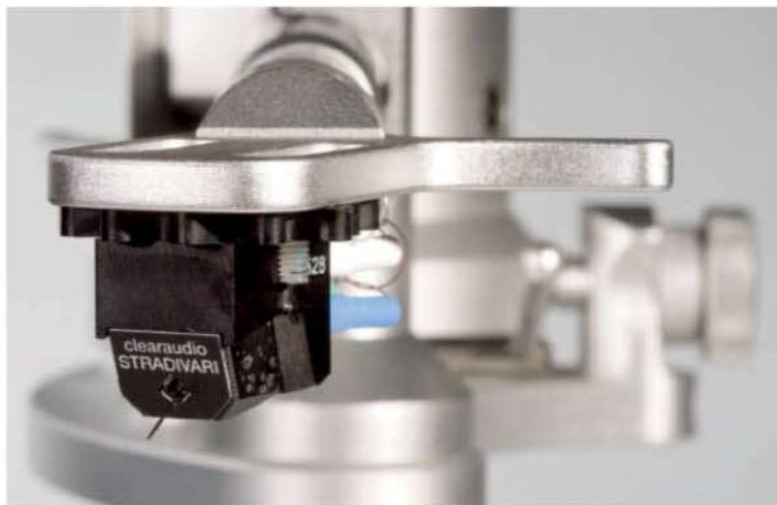
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TURNTABLE



ABOVE: The carbon-tubed Universal arm, pictured here with Clearaudio's new Stradivari moving-coil [reviewed in *HFN* Aug '10]

lines were firm and taut with commensurately powerful 'punch' as always from this dynamic cut. However the clinically-sharp blasts of brass and electronica appeared a tad slow and over-polite.

Similarly with 'Little Wing' from Stevie Ray Vaughan's *The Sky Is Crying* [Sony/Epic EPC 468640 1] the crashing cymbals and violent guitar seemed to lack some of their usual aggression and anger.

CLEARLY RESOLVED

Curiously the sound was highly detailed and informative, despite appearing a little 'dulled' at high frequencies. Think of a TV picture where the contrast has been turned down a couple of notches to avoid over-exuberant 'glare'.

Nevertheless, delicate details that provide auditory cues to describe the sound of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra performing Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* in Orchestra Hall nearly 50 years ago [RCA Living Stereo / Chesky Records RC4] were clearly resolved across a wide image. The massed strings were smooth and sweet while appearing to spread well beyond the outside edges of the speakers.

Everything appeared controlled and ordered, with a quiet background that allowed you to hear all the way into the decay of the recording venue. But the marked absence of 'sparkle' robbed the performance of hair-raising drama. In short it was a little staid; just a touch too polite. There again you could never accuse this turntable/

arm combination of sounding offensive. Joe Jackson's 'Right And Wrong' from his three-sided *Big World* album of 1986 [A&M JWA 3] sounded uncommonly easy-on-the-ear despite it being an early digital recording. While the dynamic crashes of electric guitar together with the drum kit's cymbals can all too often jar the senses on this rather brash and lively cut, the Innovation Compact kept any over-exuberance at bay to allow fatigue-free listening.

A downside of this genteel demeanour was highlighted when playing Stevie Wonder's 'Superstition' from *Talking Book* [Tamla Mowtown STMA 8007], the combo highlighting the recording's rather dated sound. You might admire the tidiness while simultaneously wishing for a little more shine. ☹

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

As with every Clearaudio turntable we've tested, the Innovation Compact is well engineered and the quality of finish is first rate. It comes with a five-year guarantee too. It's highly revealing of tonearm 'character', so with judicious choice of arm and cartridge the sound can be tuned to suit. Used with the Universal arm it sounds velvety and refined, but might prove too laidback for some.

Sound Quality: 76%

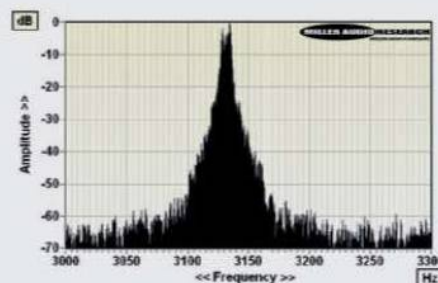


LAB REPORT

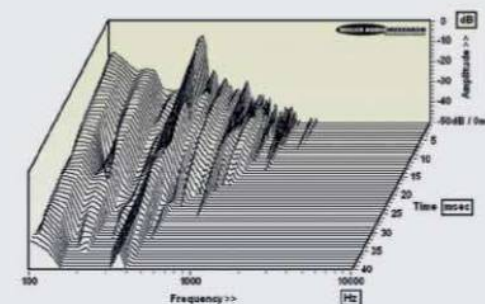
CLEARAUDIO INNOVATION COMPACT (£4250)

Comparisons with Clearaudio's heftier Innovation deck [*HFN* Sept '09] are instructive for there's a strong family resemblance. Despite the OSC system, the Compact also runs very slightly slow (-0.3% versus -0.1% for the Innovation) but with very little low-rate drift. Any wow that is present remains discrete in nature, the peak 0.04% figure almost solely attributable to a ± 3 Hz variation [see Graph 1, below], while higher-rate flutter is largely and innocuously noise-like in appearance. The freedom from ± 50 Hz sidebands is equally evident. In common with the big Innovation, this Compact model boasts very low levels of bearing rumble. In fact at -73.5dB it is nearly 1dB better than its larger brother, probably due to the lower mass of its platter operating on the same 'Ceramic Magnetic' bearing, and ranks as one of the 'quietest' decks we've tested.

This is also the first opportunity we've had to put Clearaudio's Universal tonearm through the lab where, I'm glad to report, it emerges with flying colours. Bearing friction is <10mg in both planes while the cumulative spectral decay plot reveals some housing modes up to 200Hz, one main beam mode at ~350Hz and several lower amplitude harmonics up to around 2kHz [see Graph 2, below]. Importantly these modes tail off by at least 30dB over the 40msec time window available to the test – this is far from a 'lively' arm and an ideal partner for energetic MCs! Readers are invited to view a full QC Suite report for the Clearaudio Innovation Compact turntable/Universal arm package by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ± 150 Hz, 5Hz per minor division).



ABOVE: Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and tube vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.23rpm (-0.3%)
Time to audible stabilisation	5sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.04% / 0.04%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-69.0dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-73.5dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-62.3dB
Power Consumption	1W
Dimensions (WHD)	479x141x485mm

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hi-fineWS GROUP TEST

Many sub-£1000 integrated amplifiers are capable of delivering fabulous sound when hooked up to quality floorstanding speakers. This month we have six of the best on test

INTEGRATED AMPS £700-£1K

TESTED THIS MONTH

CREEK 5350	£1075
CYRUS 6 XP	£925
DENON PMA-1510AE	£900
MARANTZ PM8003	£800
MUSICAL FIDELITY M3I	£1000
PIONEER A-A9MK2	£800



Cutting-edge gear, cherry-picked by the Hi-Fi News editor



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• CD PLAYERS • TURNTABLES • CARTRIDGES • AM/FM TUNERS • **AMPLIFIERS** • HEADPHONES • SPEAKERS •

One route to cost-effective audio nirvana is to drive a large pair of floorstanding loudspeakers with budget-priced electronics. This might fly in the face of the old adage 'garbage in, garbage out', but the advent of digital audio turned traditional hi-fi hierarchy on its head many years ago.

For example, my ageing Pioneer DV-868AVi universal disc spinner is capable of producing tremendous sound from CD, SACD and DVD-Audio discs, yet at £800 (when it was new, several years ago) it cost less than a really tasty MC cartridge. Moreover, a dichotomy of hi-fi system building is that compact, high performance mini monitors tend to require expensive, powerful amplifiers to drive them adequately, whereas large floorstanding loudspeakers are more efficient and can deliver high sound pressure levels from just a few watts of amplifier power.

So, while the 'front-end-first' mantra still holds true to some extent for those with a very small listening room (or can't move much air for fear of disturbing neighbours),

if you've adequate space and want to enjoy a full range sound that conjures audio images of life-sized musicians performing then it's logical to buy the biggest and best pair of speakers you can afford. Then drive them with a sensibly-priced amplifier and digital source.

This is what we've done this month, the six integrated amplifiers on test driving both Monitor Audio PL200 floorstanders and my resident Townshend Sir Galahad loudspeakers.

BIG SOUND ON A BUDGET

Each of the integrated amplifiers here proved perfectly capable of delivering a laudible facsimile of high-end sound. But so fierce is the competition between manufacturers of affordable audio components that choosing between brands and models necessitates careful consideration.

Our group of amplifiers offers a varying range of facilities, and through the 'open window' of the big monitoring speakers it was clearly apparent that there are substantial differences in the sound they deliver too.

I've used it so many times when assessing hi-fi systems but Dire Straits' 'Private Investigations' from *Love Over Gold* [Mercury 8000882] still remains a worthwhile test of a component's transparency and dynamic control. Likewise the 2009 remaster of The Beatles' *Abbey Road*. Here I used the timeless track 'Come Together', Ringo Starr's energetic drums proving a stern test of each amplifier's bass control – not to mention its ability to make cymbals sound lifelike.

Also used in the listening tests was the finale 'Amen. In Sempiterna Saecula' from a recording of Rossini's *Stabat Mater* featuring the Vienna State Opera under conductor Myung Whun Chung [Deutsche Grammophon 449 1782 6]. This is a useful tool for demonstrating a system's ability to unravel a mix.

Meanwhile, 'So Real' from the late Jeff Buckley's 1994 classic *Grace* album [Sony 4759285] is a great track for revealing whether or not a hi-fi system really does make a rock band sound real. ☺

REVIEWS BY JOHN BAMFORD
LAB TESTS BY PAUL MILLER

• CD PLAYERS • TURNTABLES • CARTRIDGES • AM/FM TUNERS • **AMPLIFIERS** • HEADPHONES • SPEAKERS •

Creek Evolution 5350 (£1075)



Having upgraded its Evolution amplifier and CD player to Evo '2' status last year, Creek has recently introduced this '5350 model as an addition to its Evolution range. It has a higher power rating than the Evo 2, with an extra line input and A/B/A+B speaker switching.

Its slim profile and polished fascia (black or silver finish available) give it a sleek look, a blue filtered vacuum fluorescent display indicating input and volume settings. The display has three brightness levels (set via the handset) but cannot be fully turned off. Rotary digital controls are used for input selection and volume, with push buttons for tape monitor, speaker switching and muting. One of the Aux inputs can be factory fitted with a choice of two MM phono modules based on circuits employed in designer Mike Creek's Sequel amp of yore, designated MM40 (£90) and MM48 (£130).

The Evolution handset, festooned with identically sized buttons, will have been discontinued by the time you read this, Creek declaring that after July 2010 *all* its products will ship with its more ergonomic SRC3 controller that accompanies its more expensive Destiny components. The 5350 did run very warm [see Lab Report], so remember to take extra care to ensure it has adequate ventilation.

TRUE LIFE

Punching above its weight, the Evolution 5350 sounded bold and self-assured. Jeff Buckley's vocal hung beautifully between the loudspeakers while the crack of the



ABOVE: No tone controls or balance are provided with the Evolution 5350, but it does include A/B speaker switching

snare drum and ringing of cymbals sounded delectably true to life.

'Comfortable' and 'relaxed' are words that appear in my listening notes for the '5350, the sound combining the dynamic excitement and tight control of the Musical Fidelity and Pioneer amplifiers with the liquidity and sweet tonality of an esoteric valve amp. The Beatles' 'Come Together' sounded most explicit, Ringo Starr's kick drum delivering a mighty punch while his hi-hat was crisp and 'fast'.

Similarly Mark Knopfler's acoustic guitar in Dire Straits' 'Private Investigations' was full bodied with a sharp bite to the leading edges, giving a sense of realism that is more commonly the reserve of expensive high-end amps. As volume builds the sound remains focused and controlled, the lack of compression being particularly noticeable with the massed voices in the dense Stabat Mater recording.

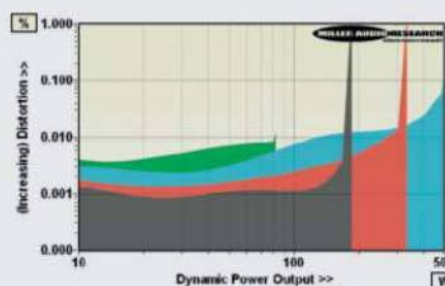
Sound Quality: 80%



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Creek's literature warns of the 5350's need for adequate ventilation but this high power amplifier is either over-biased or 'under-sunk' for in practice it shuts down after just 15 minutes running at 10W/8ohm. This obviously needs to be addressed by the engineers at Creek Audio. Tested with gentle air cooling, the 5350 went on to deliver a substantial 2x140W into 8ohm and 2x218W/4ohm with peaks of 185W, 335W and 550W into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads making this by far the beefiest amp in our test [see Graph, below]. It also offers the lowest overall gain (+34dB) but this is perfectly sufficient for use with modern line-level sources and optimises the range of the volume pot.

Distortion is very consistent with power output (~0.001% through the midrange from 1W-130W) and increases only marginally with frequency, reaching a mere 0.007% at 40kHz. The response is exceptionally flat and extended (+0.5dB/5Hz and -0.4dB/100kHz) but the A-wtd S/N ratio is some 8dB below average at 76.7dB (re. 0dBW), a feature of the low gain perhaps. Heat aside, this is a hugely capable amplifier. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)



ABOVE: Pre-out and power-in sockets are provided along with five line inputs and a tape output. MM phono module is a factory-fit option in place of the Aux 1 input

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	140W / 218W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	185W / 335W / 550W / 83W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.053-0.085ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.0 to -0.42dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/100W)	58mV / 585mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/100W)	76.7dB / 96.7dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.00075-0.004%
Power consumption (idle/Rated o/p)	41W / 390W
Dimensions (WHD)	430x90x340mm

Cyrus 6 XP (£925)

While appearing something of a 'mini amp' alongside the others featured here, Cyrus Audio's 6 XP is actually the most versatile model of the entire test group. Its fixed-level tape output can be used as an independent zone output to drive a system in another room, the Zone button on the front selecting which source is routed to the second room. Meanwhile the Setup button allows the amp's six line inputs to be labelled as one chooses and their input sensitivities trimmed. It's something of a lightweight at just 4kg, due in part to its chassis being a magnesium die-casting, the case incorporating the amps' heatsinks.

This is Cyrus's entry-level integrated amp, rated at 40W whereas its £1300 8 XP model is rated at 70W and also features a port for connecting one of Cyrus's add-on PSX-R regulated power supplies. Nor does this 6 XP have the built-in DAC of the £1500 8 XPd. Nevertheless, it can be returned to the Huntingdon factory for re-working should you wish to upgrade it in the future. Having it converted to an 8 XP costs £400, while having Cyrus's digital card fitted (this adds 5 digital inputs, including a USB input) is £425. The two mods together, to convert the 6 XP into fully loaded 8 XPd, costs £700...

RICH AND SMOOTH
Jeff Buckley's 'So Real' appeared detailed and atmospheric, his vocal in particular displaying fine diction through the 6 XP. But compared with the more vivid-sounding

RIGHT: Space-saving design has been thoughtfully conceived, Cyrus providing upgradable system building blocks

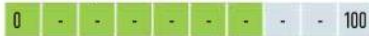
Marantz and Musical Fidelity amplifiers for example the percussion tended to sound rather 'wispy' and synthetic. As with the Denon, in the test system the Cyrus's fulsome bass robbed the sound of both low-end articulation and hear-through clarity.

Ringo's energetic kick drum was thunderous in 'Come Together', if bloated and soft and lacking the control and definition delivered by the Pioneer, Musical Fidelity and Creek amps in the group. Midrange clarity was fine – again, the vocals were explicit and projected clearly – but while there was plenty of air and space around individual sounds the hi-hat and cymbals lacked body.

It was difficult to decipher the individual strands within Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, the voices congealed within the soundstage and the orchestra's spirited playing clouded by the loose, over-dominant bass.

More successful with the Dire Straits track, the 6 XP's velvety tonality made for a rich, smooth yet punchy performance. But the Cyrus lacked the sparkle and dramatic insight of the other amps here.

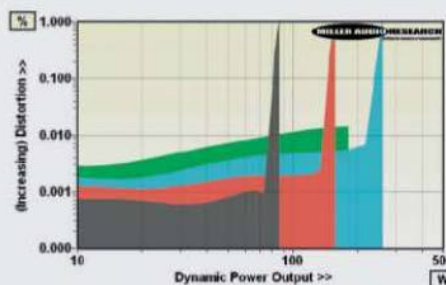
Sound Quality: 65%



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

This diminutive little package is no powerhouse but neither is it incapable of driving moderately difficult speakers. In practice its 40W rating is exceeded at 2x50W/8ohm (increasing to 87W under dynamic conditions) with 66W/4ohm building to 157W for dynamic peaks (all at <1% THD). The 6 XP offers a maximum 260W/2ohm for short term peaks but is limited by protection circuitry to ~200W/1ohm which the amplifier views as a 'fault condition'. The A-wtd S/N ratio is a little above average at 87.6dB (re. 0dBW) but distortion is vanishingly low through bass and midrange frequencies, often settling out at ~0.0002%.

Distortion increases at higher treble frequencies albeit with some asymmetry between channels, reaching 0.045% at 40kHz on the left but just 0.007% at 40kHz on the right. The amplifier's subsonic response is impressively flat to well below 5Hz but has a very gently tailored treble, reaching -0.2dB/20kHz and -3.2dB/100kHz. The 6 XP's output impedance follows a similar trend offering a flat 0.055-0.065ohm up to 6kHz, rising very gently thereafter to 0.19ohm/100kHz. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	50W / 66W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	87W 157W 260W ~200W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.057–0.095ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+0.0 to -3.2dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/40W)	30mV / 192mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/40W)	87.6dB / 103.6dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.00019–0.018%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	16W / 158W
Dimensions (WHD)	215x75x365mm



LEFT: Bi-wire BFA speaker sockets require hollowed-out 4mm plugs. Six line ins are joined by two pre-outs, tape/Zone 2 out, system bus RCAs and a headphone mini-jack

Denon PMA-1510AE (£900)

Quite the most imposing of the amplifiers in this group, Denon's PMA-1510AE weighs a hefty 15kg. Volume control is via a motorised potentiometer while a rotary input selector electronically switches the amp's five line inputs and built-in MM/MC phono stage.

Together with its accompanying DCD-1510AE CD/SACD player, the '1510AE is a new addition to Denon's 'Advanced Evolution' stereo series. Curiously its feature set harks back to a bygone age, with a separate Record Out selector allowing you to listen to one source while recording another (and copy between two recorders in either direction). Still recording LPs onto cassettes to play in the car?

A Source Direct button defeats the bass/treble/balance controls but this is not replicated on the handset so you cannot A/B a tone adjustment from your listening seat. Maddeningly the IR remote control has only source up/down keys rather than direct access buttons.

Under the bonnet is what Denon calls its 'Ultra High Current MOS circuit' topology, though much of the amp's bulk is due to its substantial chassis, front panel and massive pair of frame power transformers, mounted so as to minimise stray magnetic flux.

FRESH AND OPEN

The naked guitar intro and Jeff Buckley's delicious vocal in 'So Real' was enthralling, sounding fresh and wide open. As the intensity grew and the band hit the loud pedal the



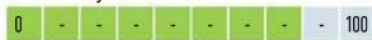
ABOVE: Available in black or silver, the PMA-1510AE is fully featured. Record Out selector is a rare sight these days

sound did however lose the precision and focus delivered by the Pioneer 'A9MK2 and Creek 5350.

As with the Cyrus XP 6 the '1510AE delivered humungous bass in the test system, though treble details were a little 'hot' in balance. Ringo's crisp hi-hat in 'Come Together' had an electronic-sounding 'sizzle', while his kick drum was overwhelming to the detriment of midrange clarity and image focus.

Similarly, Dire Straits' 'Private Investigations' was delivered in Technicolor. The Denon offered an exhilarating sound – forthright and energetic – with a spotlight on percussion details and studio reverb effects that dissected the recording's constituent parts as if looking through a magnifying glass. This is a lot of amp for the money, but match carefully to avoid listening fatigue.

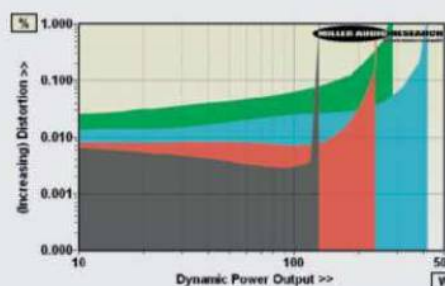
Sound Quality: 74%



HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

The +46dB overall gain is very high which suggests that Denon's choice of volume pot will not be used over its ideal range with modern, high output sources. The slightly below average 81.4dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) and 0.2dB channel imbalance possibly reflect this. Nevertheless, its power output is substantially more than the 70W specification suggests at 2x108W/8ohm and 2x165W/4ohm, increasing still further to 130W, 240W, 415W and 290W (17A) into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions [see Graph below].

Distortion is low through the midrange, increasing from 0.0018% at 1W to 0.0065% at 10W before falling again to 0.0028% at the rated 70W. Distortion rises more rapidly than is typical at higher frequencies, reaching 0.16% at 20kHz and 0.9% at 40kHz (10W/ohm). Source Direct offers by far the flatter bass response but there's an ultrasonic peak (+1.8dB/80kHz) visible into all loads. This is reflected in a dip to nearly 0ohm in output impedance while figures around 0.02ohm – a usefully low value – are typical through the audioband. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)



ABOVE: Five line inputs and two tape outputs are joined by a MM/MC phono input and pre-out/power-in sockets. The two sets of speaker terminals are not switchable

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	108W / 165W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	130W / 240W / 415W / 290W
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.017–0.060ohm
Frequency response (20Hz–100kHz)	+1.8 to –0.76dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/70W)	14mV / 121mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/70W)	81.4dB / 99.9dB
Distortion (20Hz–20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.004–0.15%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	54W / 306W
Dimensions (WHD)	434x134x410mm

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Marantz PM8003 (£800)

With many models based on what Marantz calls its MI chassis they can be difficult to differentiate until you get up close. While less heavy duty than the sumptuous PM-KI Pearl [see *HFN*, Sep '09] this PM8003 commands a premium thanks to the reinforced chassis floor, extensive copper plating and hand-selected components. Its partnering CD/SACD player is the excellent SA8003 that won an EISA Award last year.

Inputs are switched electronically via a rotary dial, a row of blue LEDs indicating the source selected. Fully featured with bass, treble and balance controls together with A/B/A+B speaker switching, the supplied system handset provides direct input selection and Source Direct to bypass the tone controls remotely. Volume control is via an Alps motorised potentiometer.

Pressing its 'Power Amp Direct' button for three seconds (until the light glows blue) switches the PM8003 into a power amp. Also featured is a MM-only phono stage taken from Marantz's high-end SC-11S1 preamp. It's a current feedback design employing discrete transistors, mounted far from the power supply on its own board in a bid to minimise noise.

TRUE GRIP

The PM8003 sounded tight and controlled and much like the Musical Fidelity M3i in its lucidity. The Beatles' 'Come Together' was particularly vivid, with taut kick drum and texture to George Harrison's distorted guitar chops.



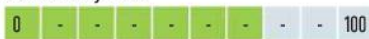
ABOVE: High feature count sees speaker selector on fascia together with Source Direct and Power Amp Direct

Only by a hint of electronic 'edge' to cymbals marred the performance.

The Jeff Buckley track was similarly 'fast' and crisp, the snap of the snare and clearly-resolved reverberation making for a thrilling 'high-resolution' performance. It would be unfair to call the sound up-front – there was air and space in abundance – but it was less forgiving than the MF and even the brightly-lit Denon, with highlighted sibilants.

In 'Private Investigations' Knopfler's acoustic guitar sounded less full-bodied than with the Pioneer and Creek, a hard edge adding a degree of coarseness to his gruff vocal delivery. Don't push the volume, however, and the brilliant tonality allows you to hear deeply into a recording's details. Certainly the choir in Stabat Mater sounded like a throng of individuals, rather than a solid mass.

Sound Quality: 70%

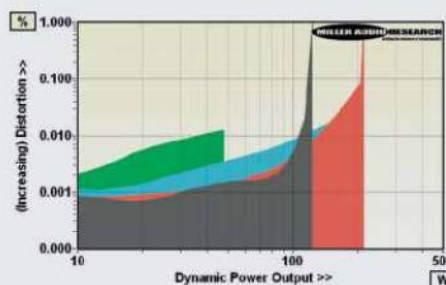


ABOVE: MM-only phono input is joined by pre-out/power-in and five line inputs with two tape outputs. Remote control in/outputs service Marantz system integration

HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

This is one amplifier that really benefits from bypassing its bass/treble controls in 'Source Direct' mode. Here the A-wtd S/N ratio improves by nearly 1dB to 91.9dB (re. 0dBW) while there's a worthwhile improvement in subsonic bass extension, lifting from -0.4dB/20Hz and -1.1dB/5Hz to a 'flatter' -0.04dB/20Hz and -0.24dB/5Hz. Power output is unaffected, as you might expect, and indeed it's pretty much identical to the 2x100W/150W 8/4ohm delivery measured for the sister PM7003 model [see *HFN*, Mar '09].

The PM8003's superior toroidal transformer eases out a slightly higher 215W under dynamic conditions into 4ohm but into 2 and 1ohm this is cut short to 188W and 50W by Marantz's electronic protection. The superior component selection and PCB have reduced capacitive coupling, thereby widening the stereo separation through the treble, but the general trend of distortion remains very low indeed on both models (falling to 0.0005% midband). The PM8003, however, has a 'bump' in distortion of 0.04% at 20Hz in the bass. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	98W / 150W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	124W / 215W / 188W / 50W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.075-0.095ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.0 to -0.72dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/70W)	23mV / 201mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/70W)	91.9dB / 108.5dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.0005-0.043%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	28W / 276W
Dimensions (WHD)	440x128x379mm



Musical Fidelity M3i (£1000)

Described by Musical Fidelity as employing a Class A preamplifier with independent power supply and driver circuit (originally developed for the company's reference model Titan amplifier), this brand new M3i integrated shares the casework of the company's M6 Series components but in a slightly lower-profile chassis.

Subtly understated and rather handsome to these eyes, close inspection reveals its chassis is in fact housed in a fairly utilitarian case, with painted (black or silver) metal front panel. But with its contrasting metal volume control and simple row of input selector buttons it looks and operates just as an amp should.

Just beware of the small slider switch at the rear. One of the amp's six line inputs (AUX 1) can be used as a power amp input. Have a line-level source connected and the switch in the wrong position... and you'll get a mighty fright!

The supplied IR handset is a straightforward, unambiguous affair with logical button layout and controls for a partnering CD player from the MF stable. There's no built-in phono stage here, so you'll need to budget for an external one if you're a turntable owner.

VIBRANT AND DYNAMIC

Bold and lucid, seemingly with tight control of the speakers' woofers in the test system, the M3i portrayed the dynamic contrasts in 'So Real' to great effect. With bags of three-dimensionality, Jeff Buckley's lamenting voice hovered behind the speakers, imbued with emotion and atmosphere. The drum kit in the



ABOVE: The M3i is the only amp here with no headphone socket or phono input option – so budget accordingly

studio had great presence, while the tails of reverberation around the lead vocal were clearly resolved while avoiding the synthetic edginess of the Marantz and Cyrus.

'Private Investigations' sounded both vibrant and dynamic, the amplifier again demonstrating deep, tight and controlled bass during the track's wilder moments. It didn't appear to harden during the music's crashing piano chords, however its vivid sonic character did rob the piano and acoustic guitar of the tonal colour and warmth delivered by the Creek and Pioneer.

Meanwhile, the Vienna State Opera Chorus was brightly-lit and clearly focused in *Stabat Mater*, spread in a wonderful acoustic. Air and space allowed the orchestral parts to be followed clearly as the intensity built throughout the piece to its crashing climax – again without hardening or compression.

Sound Quality: 76%

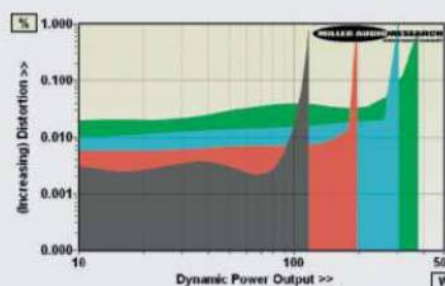


ABOVE: A single set of speaker terminals, with six line inputs – one of which can be switched to become a power amp in. Pre-out provides system upgrading flexibility

HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

The instruction manual accompanying this unusually deep amplifier specifies its output at an equally unusually precise '76W per channel'. This it achieves by the skin of its transistors with a 240V AC mains supply, delivering 2x79W and 2x109W into 8/4ohm loads with sufficient headroom to accommodate peaks of 117W, 198W, 305W and 380W into 8, 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions [see Graph, below].

The A-wtd S/N ratio is slightly above average at 86.9dB (re. 0dBW) but the output impedance rather higher than the solid-state norm at 0.25ohm. The 'flatness' of this source impedance from 20Hz-100kHz is evidently engineered as is the slight -1dB/5Hz subsonic roll-off, so the M3i's 8ohm frequency response (-0.1dB to -0.16dB, 20Hz-20kHz) will vary slightly more according to the 'real world' impedance of the partnering loudspeakers. Distortion, however, is extremely well managed through the audio range – just 0.002-0.006% at 10W/8ohm – even if the DC offset is arguably too high at -75mV. Watch out for biased bass/mid speaker cones. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	79W / 109W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	117W / 198W / 305W / 380W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.24-0.26ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	-0.10 to -2.8dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/75W)	22mV / 195mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/75W)	86.9dB / 105.7dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.0015-0.0063%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	20W / 267W
Dimensions (WHD)	440x100x400mm



Pioneer A-A9MK2 (£800)

Since Pioneer upgraded its 'G-Clef' audio components a year ago we've tested the cheaper PD-D6/A-A6 disc player/amp combo in MK2 guise, and the PD-D9MK2 CD/SACD player too, but not this A-A9MK2 amplifier.

While the minimalist styling remained, the livery changed to a deep satin black for the brushed aluminium fascias of the MK2s. The difficult-to-read white displays improved to blue filtered LCD panels, however the small size means that source selection and volume settings are still impossible to read from across a room. The biggest improvement is to the remote controller, the original credit card-type affair replaced with a substantial aluminium handset providing direct source access and adjustment of the (bypass-able) bass/treble/balance controls. The amp's front panel is bereft of controls other than a rotary source selector, volume knob and 'Direct' button that disables the dimmable display as well as the tone circuits.

As before, the 'A9 is a dual-mono design through-and-through with a 'twin toroidal' transformer. Pioneer also appears to have revised the PCB layout and power supply, and upgraded the speaker terminals.

POLISHED PERFORMER

As we've witnessed previously from Pioneer's G-Clef components, the sound of this MK2 'A9 was detailed and polished. Exhibiting sharp clarity and high detail retrieval while avoiding the 'electronic' character of the Marantz and Denon, the Pioneer threw the soundstage of Jeff

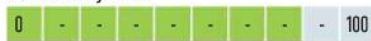


ABOVE: Clean fascia disguises the Pioneer's feature set. Switchable tone controls are accessed via IR remote

Buckley's 'So Real' track into sharp relief. As witnessed with the Creek 5350, the shimmer of cymbals was splendid in its realism. The thwack of the kick drum rattled the snare and the sense of acoustic space added to the recording's intimate atmosphere. Meanwhile, The Beatles' 40-year-old recording from Abbey Road sounded as fresh as if it had been recorded last week – 'double mono' notwithstanding.

While the Pioneer made harder work of the dense *Stabat Mater* piece, a hint of congestion during crescendos revealing that this is budget esoterica rather than a truly high-end design, the choir and orchestra at full throttle remained commendably intelligible. And 'Private Investigations' sounded dynamic and relaxed in equal measure, the amp unfazed by the crashing chords of electric guitar.

Sound Quality: 78%

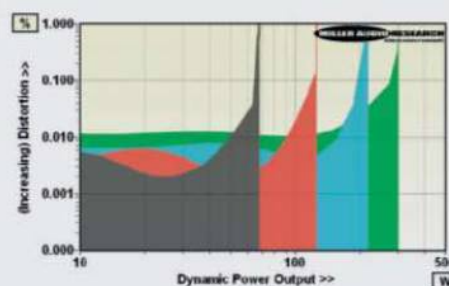


ABOVE: USB input for PC hookup, plus MM/MC phono, four line inputs, pre-out and tape out. Left speaker posts are very close to AC input, so watch your cable routing

HI-FI NEWS LAB REPORT

Enthusiasts will be intrigued to learn of the difference(s) between this MK2 and the original A-A9 [HFN, Apr '09]. The +40.6dB overall gain and 68W/98W power output into 8/4ohm are unchanged as is the useful increase to 126W, 215W and 300W into 4, 2 and 1ohm loads under dynamic conditions [see Graph, below]. Even the modest 84.5dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) and slightly high -50mV DC offset is exactly as it was. Nevertheless, Pioneer's engineers do seem to have 'tweaked' the A-A9's HF compensation (feedback).

This slight reduction in feedback is manifest as an increase in output impedance at very high frequencies, (from 0.09ohm to 0.11ohm at 20kHz and 0.24ohm to 0.64ohm at 100kHz), resulting in a slightly more obvious ultrasonic treble roll-off into lower impedance loads. Distortion, too, now increases more obviously with frequency, from 0.002-0.055% (20Hz-40kHz) with the A-A9 to 0.003-0.45% with this latest A-A9MK2. Intermodulation distortion is also up slightly to 0.04%. These effects are subtle, but may exert some sonic 'sweetening'. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm loads (green)

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	68W / 98W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	68W / 126W / 215W / 300W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.056-0.11ohm
Frequency response (20Hz-100kHz)	+0.0 to -0.83dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/55W)	26mV / 200mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (for 0dBW/55W)	84.7dB / 102.1dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.0036-0.083%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	42W / 215W
Dimensions (WHD)	420x113x369mm

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GROUP TEST VERDICT

• CD PLAYERS • TURNTABLES • CARTRIDGES • AM/FM TUNERS • **AMPLIFIERS** • HEADPHONES • SPEAKERS •

All six amplifiers proved capable of delivering great music despite their less-than-high-end price tickets, reinforcing the crux that if you want a hi-fi system to take your breath away and provide a window into the recording studio or concert hall it's perfectly feasible to use moderately-priced electronics and spend the bulk of your overall budget on loudspeakers. Just ensure that the speakers offer a decent sensitivity and present a relatively easy load.

THROUGH THE WINDOW

Like all its diminutive 'building block' components Cyrus's 6 XP is popular thanks to its compact size, flexibility and designed-in upgrade path. Its warm balance doubtless will ameliorate the coarse nature of inexpensive speakers' tweeters but its performance capability is limited if your aspirations are more grand.

Listening through wide bandwidth speakers showed that the 6 XP is outclassed by the others in our test group in terms of bass resolution and overall transparency. The Marantz PM8003, for example, sounded both more open and 'pristine' with better resolution of fine detail. But it's not quite the stellar performer that its award-winning partnering SA8003 CD/SACD player is, sounding a little processed and bleached.

An additional £130 buys the Denon PMA-1510AE that sounds more forthright in its delivery of music than the Marantz, with a bold and exuberant spirit. It will require a little care in system matching as its 'hot' balance won't suit all tastes, and it doesn't appear to adequately grip the woofers of very large floorstanders, but it sure is an awful lot of amplifier for the money.

Musical Fidelity's new M3i continues the company's tradition of offering minimalist, no-frills products

with the focus on performance. Sounding exceptionally vivid with good recordings, fast and dynamic too, the amp is precisely what Musical Fidelity would claim it to be: a taste of high-end audio for the sagacious audiophile.

Of course its limited feature set – no headphone socket, no phono input – might preclude it from the shortlist of some cost conscious music lovers out there, but this is necessarily part of any enthusiast's purchasing decision.

Creek Audio's new Evolution 5350 increased in price from £1000 to £1075 during our

test period, making it the most expensive of the bunch. But its gracious demeanour is beguiling, its distinguished performance making it sound like a *really* expensive amplifier. It was fast and dynamic-sounding while also

appearing luscious and relaxed. I thought it sounded fabulous – and we're recommending it here on the proviso that the manufacturer attends to the over-temperature issue [see the Lab Report, p38].

BUDGET BARGAIN

Originally priced at £800 on launch, Pioneer's A-A9MK2 is now commonly available for less than £700 from hi-fi dealers, making it a bargain piece of budget esoterica for aspiring audiophiles. In practice, the MK2

variants of Pioneer's 'G-Clef' components are even more refined than the original versions introduced three years ago.

There are no tinny wrap-over bonnets here; even

the components' side panels are aluminium, not just the fascias. The Pioneer A-A9MK2 sounds polished and powerful, the inclusion of a USB input reinforcing both its flexibility and appeal, making it tremendous value for money. ☺

'At less than £700 this amp is a bargain piece of budget esoterica'



ABOVE: The most expensive amp on test but the best, Creek's Evolution 5350 offers a fast and dynamic presentation with a taste of the true high-end while (below) the Pioneer proves a real budget bargain with a powerful yet highly polished sound

• CD PLAYERS • TURNTABLES • CARTRIDGES • AM/FM TUNERS • **AMPLIFIERS** • HEADPHONES • SPEAKERS •

Paradigm Reference Signature S8 v.3 (£8800)

Canadian company Paradigm shifts up a gear, topping its Signature range with a stunning six-driver floorstander
 Review: **Richard Stevenson** Lab: **Keith Howard**

Offering me the review of a large six-driver, three-way, twin-ported pair of floorstanding loudspeakers is much like asking Keith Richards if he fancies a swift half and a Woodbine. I love products on the more extreme side of audio engineering and Paradigm's range-topping Signature S8 certainly fits the bill. This is a tall and meatily constructed beast with an elegantly slim front profile and a deep, curvaceous cabinet that slips sail-like into the space behind. Despite their impressive proportions, with the grilles on and viewed from the listening position their visual impact is subtle and even rather chic.

This is the best way to enjoy both the sound and design of the S8s for two very important reasons. The first is that the full length grilles, with their curved lower part that fits snugly into a cabinet rebate, are actually a grid of plastic waveguides covered in acoustically transparent cloth and play a part in the S8 sound. The second and actually more compelling reason to leave the grilles in place is that behind the sleek cloth lurks a dense mash-up of different trims, surrounds, driver colours and fixings with all the visual finesse of a breakers yard on a wet Wednesday. The driver chassis are horribly proud, the bolts ugly, the chequering around the tweeter baffle and front port grotesque and the bobbly roll-surrounds are just plain weird. And with sub-£200 mini-monitors on the market offering sub-surface magnetic grill fixings, the S8's array of old-school plastic grille-lug sockets is so very wrong for 2010.

However, much of the eye-watering carnage has its roots in the acoustic design, including those moulded 'bobbly' surrounds (new for the v.3), the die-cast heatsink driver chassis and the different cone materials. The four 7in bass units are mineral-filled polypropylene, the 7in mid driver is a cobalt-infused anodised aluminium material

and the tweeter is a phosphorus-beryllium dome behind its own chrome grille. More interestingly still, what looks like an engineer's romp through an exotic parts catalogue is in fact a holistic system whose parts have been designed, tested and manufactured almost exclusively by Paradigm in Canada. Only the beryllium dome itself is bought-in. Few loudspeakers on the market can claim such unique composition.

THE PARADIGM SHIFT

Weighing in at a fairly hefty 45kg a piece the S8 is actually quite an easy beast to move around due to its well spaced outriggers.

Supplied with rubber bung feet (which compress down hard) or spikes, I would recommend keeping the rubbers in place until you find the perfect room position for the speakers as this proved to be something

'The Signature S8 is a speaker with a very high goosebump rating'

of a challenge. Front and rear ports, large enough to lose a cat in, vent separate internal enclosures and are tuned low down. Drop these Paradigms in the room close to a wall or corner and you are hit with bulbous bass, fatter than an Italian opera singer. While I like my bass like my women, firm and fruity, you can definitely have too much of a good thing.

The positional fun doesn't stop there either. In use the beryllium dome tweeter appears to have a very narrow dispersion pattern. On perfect vertical and horizontal axes you get the full output, rolling off substantially at only a few degrees to the side, or below axis. This gives you incredible control over the relative top-end balance, which I think is ideal. These are a big speakers made for big (American/Canadian) rooms and in my Sussex box, sitting just 10ft from the tweeters, you can control

RIGHT: Despite the six-driver array, the Paradigm Signature S8 is a three-way design packing four identical bass drivers, a cobalt aluminium alloy midrange cone and a beryllium tweeter





the HF output energy with incredible precision simply by toeing the beasts in or out of the axis position. As I have a low-slung 'relaxing' sofa, a degree or two of forward tilt was also required using the slim edge of four hard rubber door wedges. While not exactly plug and play, the S8's high sensitivity, wide bandwidth and positional tune-ability make this one very flexible pair of floorstanders.

SHAKE BABY, SHAKE

First impressions count, they say. I'm not so sure. Hurriedly positioned in-room, hooked up to cool amps and given a hasty blast with Natalie Merchant's *Ophelia* the S8s seemed to play fast and loose with the track's bass line. My room got all excited, the light fittings rattled, bass swamped the top end and the seismograph down at Dungeness a few miles away twitched in time with the tune.

Fast forward a couple of days. It is a relaxed afternoon with warmed up equipment and the two or three hours moving the S8s around the day before are paying big dividends. While the ports are large and scary the output is incredibly tight and controlled. Ensure they are working with your room and not against it and the bottom end is big but taut, fast and richly detailed. Suddenly the S8s' midband and top-end dexterity are revealed in their glory. The beryllium tweeter is fast and sweet with superb extension, leading to an amazingly natural sound and spatial projection of epic proportion.


Playing the really open-sounding 'Better Days' from Supertramp's *Brother Where You Bound* my room grew in every direction, taking on hall-like dimensions. The music filled the new space with rich ambience and articulate instrumental positioning.

It's like getting a free room extension with every pair of S8s – and you don't have to put up with dust and builders' bum cracks for months on end either.

The top end dances just the right side of the line, reaching high and projecting with real energy yet at no time sounding grainy or harsh. It's a trick few speakers manage, particularly when you are exploring the tolerance limits of the neighbours.

Peter Gabriel's natural sibilance is an acid test in this respect and the speakers lapped up the tricky *Scratch My Back* CD. On 'Boy In The Bubble' the piano enjoyed real warmth and a lush low sustain while Gabriel's vocal was portrayed in all its rather rosey splendour, wavering from note to note while being interspersed with heavy breaths, which the S8s refuse to let pass unnoticed.

As Gabriel goes on to murder one of my favourite tracks of all time, Radiohead's *Street Spirit (Fade Out)*, the S8s simply drop down a gear to capture the thicker, heavier ambience. From the close mic'd vocal to the slow but forceful piano notes the sound is pure intensity. The speakers portray the song's dark thoughts with aplomb yet never sound congested or artificially shut-in. Darn it, having heard it through the S8s I could even start liking Gabriel's slant on this track.

And therein lies Paradigm's trump card. Yes this is a speaker of integrity and balance, but more to the point it is one that delivers music with all its emotional charge, foot-tapping rhythm and dancing naked round the sofa to The Doors' 'This Is The End' (optionally, of course) sort of passion. It produces everything on the disc with an accuracy that allows the more emotive and intangible underpinnings of the music simply to breathe into .

BACK IN THE UK...

Paradigm was founded in 1982, the baby of Canadian National Research Institute stalwarts Jerry VanderMarel and Scott Bagby. Alongside sister company Anthem it has grown to become one of North America's leading brands. About ten years ago the company had a false start in the UK, trading a range of entry-level subwoofers through Richer Sounds. A decade on and the much larger and more mature company, now operating from a bespoke facility in Ontario, is back in the UK with its high-end Signature loudspeaker range distributed by SIM2. With the S8 at the top of the series, a smaller floorstander (S6), two standmounts (S1 and S2), a centre channel (S5) and three rather extreme subs (like the claimed 4500W SUB 2) complete the line up.

LOUDSPEAKER

LAB REPORT

PARADIGM SIGNATURE S8 v.3 (E8800)

Paradigm specifies 89dB sensitivity for the S8, which corresponds closely with our pink noise figure of 88.9dB. Although it is claimed to be 'compatible with 8ohm' the S8 actually buys some of this high-ish sensitivity through low impedance, the 3.3ohm minimum modulus indicating a 4ohm nominal rating. Moreover, it has an unusually large impedance phase angle at bass frequencies, near the modulus minimum, resulting in a low minimum EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) of 1.5ohm at 71Hz which makes it a pretty challenging load to drive.

The on-axis frequency response trend is mildly concave, with slightly suppressed output through the presence band followed by a rising, uneven treble [see Graph 1, below]. These curves were measured with the grilles in place because their plastic mouldings fill in around the drivers to finesse the transition to the baffle edge, and not on the tweeter axis since this results in a mid/treble time misalignment. Lowering the measurement axis to the mid driver obviated this and better reflects typical seated ear height. Response errors of ± 3.7 dB and ± 4.6 dB, 200Hz-20kHz, reflect the treble unevenness, as does the high ± 2.8 dB pair matching error. Below 15kHz the matching is very much tighter at a commendable ± 0.9 dB. The diffraction-corrected near-field bass response shows a -6dB roll-off at 41Hz (re. 200Hz). The cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2, below] suggests good control of cabinet resonances but displays multiple low-level ridges in the treble, and the impedance measurements indicate a significant mode at about 260Hz. KH



ABOVE: The chunky dual binding posts can be bi-wired or bi-amped, although this seemed to have an unusually minimal affect on the S8's sound in the subjective tests

life. With a really charged recording like Frida Hyvonen's *Silence Is Wild* the effect is sublime. The surreal Scandinavian songstress's lyrics are crafted with a wonderfully natural edge, placed perfectly in the room and surrounded neatly by the simple piano accompaniment. It sounds, for all the world, like listening live. In short, the S8s offer a very real 'out of the box' experience that is thoroughly addictive.

SWITCHING AMPS...

Experimenting with different power amplifiers showed the speakers to be remarkably agnostic about partnering power too – 'ampnostic' in fact. Switching from my regular Sony TA-N1 pairing to a far more affordable Rotel RMB-1080, the S8s generated every bit of the emotion and musicality that I was growing to love. Ms Hyvonen's voice was just as well projected into the room with an almost as perfect top end while her song's often dark tones were delivered with every nuance.

Moving up tempo with more funky material saw the Rotel's upbeat character shine through, culminating in an intoxicating mix of power, passion and punch too. This is a speaker with a very high goosebump rating.

Only with rather more dense material or iffy recordings did the S8s begin to lose their fine grip on my aural senses. OK, screaming metal covers of ancient Celtic folk songs are not every audiophile's

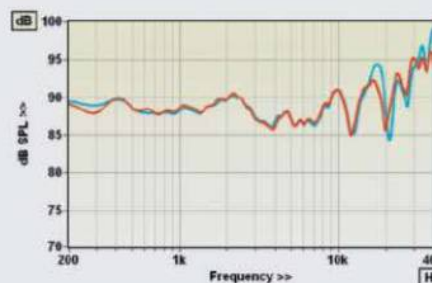
cup of Earl Grey but Eluveitie is one of the most exciting and inventive bands I have heard for ages. The CD *Slania* is a tapestry of folk instruments, drum-led rhythms and hard-core guitar riffs with multiple vocalists best described as extreme and assorted. Densely recorded, the S8s thrust out the songs with gusto and no shortage of driving bass, but the multiple LF drivers did struggle to differentiate individual notes.

At suitably extreme volumes the top end began to lose its otherwise impeccable composure. That said, by the end of the album I still felt the urge to march to the offices of *Hi-Fi News* wearing nothing but a bearskin while carrying a great sword. So the S8s are clearly getting to the soul of the music – a feat they accomplish very well indeed. ⚡

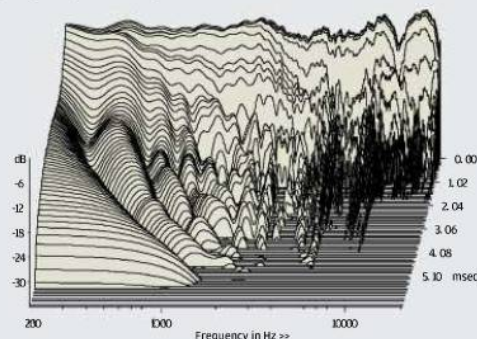
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Jeckyll (grilles on) and Hyde (grilles off) looks, bespoke engineering and close association with the Canadian National Research Council make these potent floorstanders an intriguing proposition. Difficult to position but eminently rewarding, the S8 is extended, detailed, punchy and wonderfully natural sounding. It never failed to deliver a massive soundstage, drop-dead stunning vocals and infectious musicality.

Sound Quality: 84%



ABOVE: Measured on the mid unit axis, the S8 has a slightly depressed presence band and uneven treble



ABOVE: Waterfall indicates good control of any cabinet resonances but the treble looks a little untidy

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms – Mean/IEC/Music)	89.7dB/88.9dB/88.5dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	3.3ohm @ 92Hz 44.4ohm @ 21Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz–20kHz)	-65° @ 57Hz 41° @ 628Hz
Pair matching (200Hz–20kHz)	± 2.8 dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	41Hz / >40kHz/>40kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.2% / 0.2% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD)	1232x210x521mm

Definition

**Stereo Sound
Grand Prix
Award 2009**

Definition DC10T

**EDITOR'S CHOICE
HI-FI CHOICE
magazine**

Definition DC10T

**Image Hi-Fi
Award 2010
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**MEDIA
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Definition DC8T



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tannoy.com

TANNOY

Wadia S7i (£13,995)

Intended as a high-end one-box solution for digital sources, this new flagship CD player with bespoke transport handles hi-res music files with aplomb

Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Refinement rather than revolution seems to be the order of the day at Wadia, at least as far as its big integrated CD players are concerned. Outwardly and inwardly, the new S7i is clearly a descendant of the 861, in production from 1999 to 2006.

Yet the S7i is more than a CD player. In Wadiaspeak, it's a 'CD Player/Decoding Computer', because, like other Wadia models with an 'i' suffix, it's equipped with digital inputs. And as with the existing 581i and 781i, a USB input is included.

What's really new about the S7i is the transport mechanism. Like other specialist companies, Wadia had always relied on bought-in transport mechanisms. 'In the 581 and 781,' says Wadia's VP of sales, James Shannon, 'we used the transport that we believed and still believe was the very best sounding available mechanism for playing back both CD and SACD. But we felt that some of things that we were refining in all the other areas of the machine were not being equalled. We felt that the mechanism was holding us back.'

So, over the past three years, Wadia has worked with the Austrian company, Stream Unlimited, which was set up by ex-Philips engineers after Philips moved its R&D to the Far East. The result is a mechanism that is 'completely and specifically designed for a Wadia application.'

FLAC, BUT NO SACD

With this new transport in the S7i, you don't get SACD. But you do get the ability to play discs with FLAC, MP3 and WMA files.

So, the front panel of the S7i is pretty well identical to that of every Wadia integrated CD player produced over the last decade or so. The cross-shaped button array provides the essential functions in an intelligent, unfussy way. The middle button opens and closes the loading tray, the right-hand one starts play or skips to the

next track if already playing, the left finds the previous track, and the top and bottom buttons do volume.

It's intuitive enough to make almost immediate sense to those who refuse to open an instruction manual, and who won't even bother to look at symbols or writing on a front panel. Which means that despite this player's high-end status, non-audiophile family members might actually enjoy using it. In the window above, the blue-lit display provides track number and time with numerals big enough to see across the room. Even bigger numbers appear temporarily when you use the volume keys, giving the level on a scale of 0 to 100 for each channel.

Normally, though, unless one of those family members has dropped it down the back of the sofa, you'll be using the remote. This is a slim, metal-cased device that packs in 33 fairly small buttons, and is comfortable to hold and nice to use once you're familiar with the layout. It adds further transport functions such as Search, whole disc or single track Repeat and direct entry of tracks via the numeric keys.

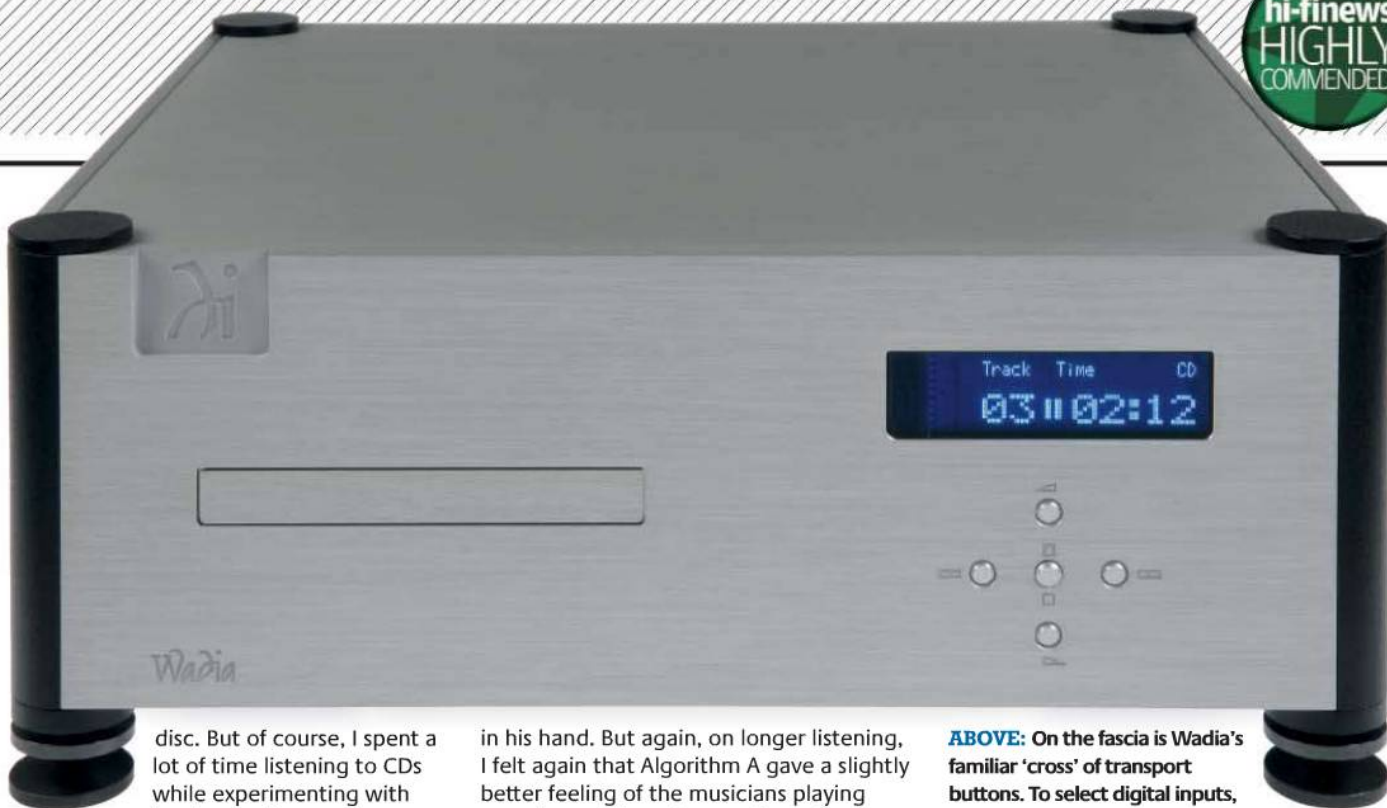
More importantly, it can select any of the four digital inputs as the active source, instead of the player's own transport. Crucially, perhaps, one of these is now a USB port, while the other options are coaxial BNC (a BNC-to-phono adaptor is supplied), AES/EBU on an XLR connector, and Toslink optical.

As with the existing 3, 5 and 7 series models, the S7i includes ClockLink, Wadia's proprietary circuit which utilises a clock located at the DAC rather than the recovered clock data from the transport, reducing jitter. ClockLink is always 'on' when running as a CD player, and it can also be used for example if the S7i's digital output is fed through an external processor and back to its own DAC via one of its digital inputs. So the menu allows any of the digital inputs to be configured with ClockLink 'on', but remember that it should be left 'off' when using a source other than the S7i's own transport.

As a 'digital hub,' I found the S7i easy and trouble-free to use, whether playing music from a Mac computer via iTunes and the USB, or playing FLAC or MP3 files from



RIGHT: Inside, Wadia has made many subtle improvements compared with previous models, but the major upgrade in the S7i player is the use of an exclusive new transport mechanism



disc. But of course, I spent a lot of time listening to CDs while experimenting with the player's filters.

SLAVE TO THE ALGORITHM

To start with, I put on Marta Gomez' *Entre Cada Palabra* [Chesky JD301]. Here I felt that with Algorithm B there was a little more freedom at the top of the singer's voice. Yet it was Algorithm A which seemed to open up a truly explicit soundstage, the floor of the church venue extending away from you into the distance. Here also, the heavy bass guitar on the first track, 'Maria Mulata,' was well resolved, so that you could perceive the instrument playing within the acoustic. Most systems fail to do this, leaving the bass sounding clumsily overblown.

Though we've been listening to it for so many years, *Jazz At The Pawnshop* [in this case, the CD layer of Proprius PRSACD7879] comes to life again and again with amazing freshness, and never more so for me than with the Wadia.

Switching filters, I initially liked Algorithm B better, with just a little more realism to Egil Johansen's brushed cymbal sound. You could almost see the wire brush

in his hand. But again, on longer listening, I felt again that Algorithm A gave a slightly better feeling of the musicians playing together. It allowed you to listen freely to any instrument, just as you are able to do in a live performance.

None of my switching experiments favoured Algorithm C, which seemed to lack the finely-judged coherence of A but no longer had the added zest or sparkle of B. After a lot more fiddling around, I eventually just carried on listening with Algorithm A.

Returning to female vocals, and the Chesky label, I put on Rebecca Pidgeon and *The Raven* [Chesky SACD 329]. Again, of course, I was playing the disc's CD layer but even so, the Wadia made it very enticing, with a great presentation of Pidgeon's lovely, youthful and determined voice.

On the opening 'Kalerka', it gave a tangible image of her voice hanging free of the accompaniment, and that lilting rhythm, gentle piano figure and strings really did conjure up the movement of the boat that she sings about.

ABOVE: On the fascia is Wadia's familiar 'cross' of transport buttons. To select digital inputs, you need the remote handset

One of my favourite test discs for image space is Respighi's *Church Windows* played by Keith Clark and the Pacific Symphony Orchestra [Reference Recordings RR-15CD]. Here I wasn't disappointed as the Wadia player opened up its own window. This was not the kind of image that only has

depth in the centre, it was a stereo stage that really seemed to have depth right to the back corners. And the huge gong crash which ends the second part sounded truthfully free and dynamic.

'With The Doors I was transported... I could only gasp in admiration'

With Boz Scaggs' *Greatest Hits Live* [Gray Cat GCD4001], the Wadia produced an enticingly layered sound. There was a real feeling of the instruments arrayed on the stage around Scaggs, seeming to enfold the subtle background singers.

WADIA VERSUS dCS...

Much as I'd enjoyed listening to the S7i so far, I had to get to grips with the \$14,000 question. How would this American player compare with the best of British, in the form of dCS?

Enlisting the help of Jeremy Baldwin of The Right Note, who has most of the dCS range available for demonstration, I set up a shoot-out between the S7i and the comparably-priced dCS Puccini. Starting with Jennifer Warnes and *Famous Blue Raincoat* [Classic RTHCD 5052], I felt that the dCS Puccini had a slightly smoother feeling overall. In the bridge section of 'First We Take Manhattan', the high synth sounds behind the vocal could sound

FAMILIAR FILTERS

As with other current models, including the 381 reviewed in the August '09 issue of *HFN*, the S7i offers the latest iteration of Wadia's proprietary reconstruction filter, along with a couple of variations for the user to try. So as before, the default setting, Algorithm A, is Digimaster v2.5, 'Wadia's classic time-domain interpolation algorithm,' said to deliver 'a robust sound with extraordinary image focus and re-creation of recorded space.' Algorithm B 'provides a more extended top end,' while Algorithm C 'retains the high-frequency extension and superior detail resolution of Algorithm B, but with a more relaxed presentation overall.' More subtle, perhaps, than you might expect from those descriptions, the differences can still be important to the musical enjoyment you get from the player, and are explored in the review.

CD PLAYER/DAC

LAB REPORT

WADIA S7i (£13,995)



ABOVE: There's a USB digital input as well as AES/EBU on XLR, BNC unbalanced and Toslink optical

almost rough with the Wadia, but were tamed by the dCS. At the bottom end, the bass guitar was perhaps a little more elastic or fluid with the dCS, enhancing its flow.

With Marta Gomez, I felt as before that the Wadia conveyed a great sense of space and of occasion. On the other hand, the dCS player had a little more precision, added cleanliness and again a smoother quality, with an alluring sense of fine detail.

DOORS OF PERCEPTION

Ultimately, the best sound you can get from the Wadia comes with hi-res files, played using the internal digital volume control to give a direct output to the power amplifier. One of the most gorgeous examples I had to hand in FLAC form was that all-time icon, 'Riders On The Storm' from The Doors' *LA Woman*, the 1971 album that turned out to be the swansong of singer Jim Morrison.

I was transported. The storm sounds were so real that you expected to see big raindrops appearing on the window.

I could only gasp with renewed admiration at the way producer Bruce Botnik had integrated the effects with the music, and the way Kreiger's rich and subtle electric guitar sound, and his beautifully constructed solo, made such a perfect foil to Manzarek's brilliant keyboard work.

Also dating from 1971 but a very different kind of recording is 'Roundabout' from the Yes album *Fragile*. At that time, the multitrack capabilities of British studios were still relatively primitive, and the band's expanding ideas were brought to fruition in the studio

thanks to the creative innovation and hard work of producer/engineer Eddy Offord.

Listening to this now, the hi-res file suddenly seemed to convey the sonic character of the era really strongly. It was like taking a 30-year time-trip back to the days when studio recordings could so often sound dry, intense and even claustrophobic.

Then I turned to 'Lucia', a track from the Marta Gomez *Entra Cada Palabra* album I'd been listening to in standard CD form.

This was a revelation too. Even the first notes of the guitar sounded more full-bodied, while the gentle accordion on the right of the stage now breathed into its own space. Marta's beautiful vocal sounded softer, more caressing, and you could hear and feel every nuance of the subtle vibrato she uses.

In fact, everything in the track, even a tiny scrape of finger noise from the guitar, had more realism and presence. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Any benefits of Wadia's new transport come at the expense of SACD capability, though that's still available on the 581 and 781 models. On CD, the S7i is excellent, with a hint of character, perhaps less neutral but arguably more soulful than the dCS alternative. It gives admirable results on high-resolution digital audio and is easy to use. Although expensive, it does give you high performance from a single box.

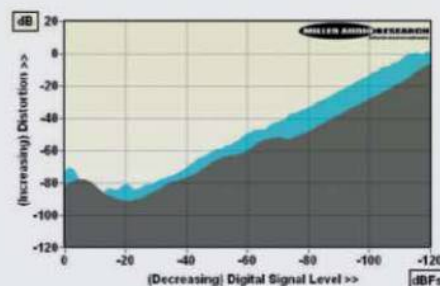
Sound Quality: 80%



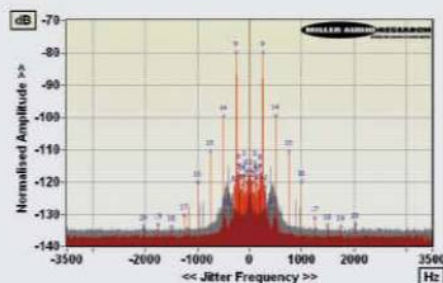
There is nothing 'conventional' about Wadia's S7i even if switchable digital filter options are now more commonplace. Wadia's default 'A' mode delivers the early high-treble roll-off (-3.6dB/20kHz) and reduced time-domain ringing we've come to expect from its longstanding Digimaster software. The reduced output at 20kHz also produces less stress on the balanced outputs and so there's less distortion - 0.025% at peak output instead of the 0.045% incurred with the flat-response filters 'B' and 'C'. None of the filters is a high-order, brickwall FIR type, the trio offering minimal stopband rejections of -6.5dB, -28.2dB and -33.7dB at 24.1kHz, respectively. Analogue distortions are still 20-30dB higher than state-of-the-art digital players, however [see Graph 1, below].

If there's a foible, rather than an outright fly in Wadia's digital filter software then the jitter test reveals its presence. Wadia defines the S7i as offering '21-bit resolution' with a '24-bit processing capability' but while the repetitive bit-toggle added at the 16th bit of CD data results in just 120psec jitter, placing it at the 24th bit of 48kHz/96kHz hi-res data causes a huge increase in jitter to ~5390psec. [Red spectrum in Graph 2, below with main patterns marked in pairs]. By way of proof, removing the repetitive data pattern at the 24th bit causes jitter to drop to just 150psec [black shadow spectrum, Graph 2]. The subjective impact of this will rather depend on the low-bit content of your 24-bit audio files - CD is 'clean'.

Readers are invited to view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for Wadia's S7i CD by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Distortion vs. digital level over a 120dB range using 16-bit CD data at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue). No substantive difference with 24-bit data



ABOVE: High resolution jitter plot with 48kHz/24-bit data. Bit toggle on (red) versus off (black). See lab text

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Output Level (Balanced)	2.17Vrms / 56ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio	104.0dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.025% / 0.0063%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBFS)	0.025%
Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz)	+0.0dB to -3.6dB (Filter A)
Digital jitter (CD/24-bit digital in)	120psec / 5390psec
Resolution @ -100dB	±0.4dB
Power consumption	34W
Dimensions (WHD)	432x178x419mm

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With its dedicated arm, the Model 30/12A possesses a majesty I hadn't heard before. Bereft of absurd, self-aggrandising over complexity exhibiting nothing but sane engineering and producing sound that's impossible to fault.

Ken Kessler Review – Hi-Fi News, March 2009

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Belles 22A/150A v2 (£2500/£2300)

Belles' 22A preamp and revised 150A v2 power amp prove that less can certainly be more. Less cost, more performance – the ideal combo for these straitened times

Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Let's get this out of the way from the outset: £4800 is still a fair chunk of change by any definition. But this pairing, which Belles' UK distributor Tony Sallis defines as a way of dealing with these financially-painful times, is a way of offering 'an involving, fun to use, sanely-priced package'. He proved it by reminding me of a review I wrote back in March 2008, of the earlier version of the 150A, and a preamp further up the Belles scale.

That package used the dearer, balanced, phono stage-equipped 28A at £3750, while the 'v1' 150A cost £2750. This time, I'm using the line-level only, single-ended 22A for £2500 – an instant saving of £1250 – and the 'v2' improved version of the 150A, which costs £450 less than its predecessor. As one who has been a part of this industry for 40 years, I find this approach to be about as sensible as one can take to ensure traffic through shop doors.

NO BELLE FLOP

But do not regard this as a headfirst dive into austerity [see Welcome, p3]. The 150A v2 is a textbook example of a robust, better-than-a-hundred-watts-per-channel, Class A/B, dual-mono solid-state amplifier of resolutely solid build. It feared none of the speakers in my arsenal, including Wilson Sophia 2s and Tannoy Mini Autographs.

There are no frills: just an on/off switch and pilot LED on the front, the minimum of stereo inputs and two pairs of multi-way binding posts on the back. The only extras are the facility to trigger this remotely, or to convert it into a balanced monoblock which Belles rates at 500W into 8ohms. The stereo rating is 125W/ch into the same impedance, or 250W into 4ohms [see Lab Report, p58].

RIGHT: Slightly smaller toroidal results in a lighter amplifier; circuitry contained on three PCBs, fed by minimal wiring. Note ample heat sinks, robust gold sockets

Shared by both channels is an all-new toroidal transformer [see box out], probably the most important change among the many that create the v2 suffix. That aside, each channel has its own circuit board, mounted directly to the heat sinks, and the prosaic styling and less-than-luxurious look, including bolt heads through the front panel, are minor sacrifices paid for gold-plated oxygen-free copper binding posts, wire and input connectors, polypropylene caps, non-inductive ceramic power resistors and 1% metal film resistors used throughout.

With the same footprint but only 89mm tall, the prettier 22A seems like a distant relative to the 150A v2, as it sports the 38mm-thick, split-look fascia of the dearer models. What you face every time you operate the 22A instead of using the supplied remote control are conventional balance and volume controls on the left-hand side of the

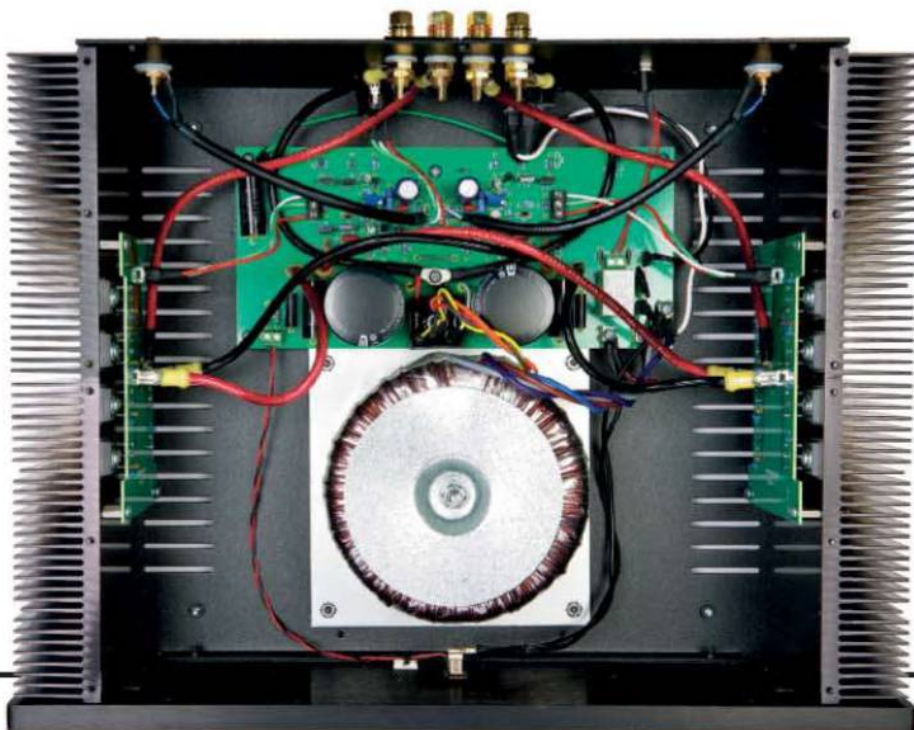
preamplifier, with tiny toggles operating power on and mute, accompanied by LED indication. On the right-hand side of the cut-out that carries the Belles logo and the IR receptor are switches to select between stereo power amp operating and home theatre throughput, plus a toggle that scrolls through the five inputs, each with its own green LED.

At the back is a row of paired phono sockets for main outputs and five line inputs, a 12V trigger and in/out monitoring for tape decks or processors. Both units accept mains via standard IEC AC sockets. There were

absolutely no hiccups during set-up, so you will have this up-and-running in minutes. The only other thing you need to know is that the 22A stays muted for a minute or so until things stabilise.

Inside the hybrid-valve, single cathode-follower-output 22A is a pair of 12AU7 valves working in conjunction

'The effect was like one of those amazing Italian pasta dishes'





with power MOSFET regulators. They also provide isolation from the power supply, which Belles credits with greatly improving the stereo capability.

Tony Sallis explains that, 'Belles designed the 22A to remove variances in vacuum tube behaviour due to manufacturing indifferences and tube aging.' He, too, notes the added whiff of luxury, when compared to the more utilitarian 150A v2. 'Externally the Belles A22 is visually a work of art. The entire chassis is made of brushed anodised aluminium. The front panel is machined and engraved.' And, like the amplifier, it's offered in black or silver. Oh, and they boast five-year warranties...

RINGING THE BELLES

Having recently acquired a pile of wonderful CDs, I concentrated on the Belles pairing in line-level mode – after a swift bout of the Linn LP12 front-end via an Audio Research PH5 phono stage.

While listening to Bobby Gentry's 'Ode To Billy Joe', I noticed that the Belles system has an interesting approach to the way it creates 'atmosphere'.

Honestly, I don't want to revert back to the 1980s obsession with lifting veils, stripping off layers, removing diaphanous gauze and other mildly pervy metaphors. Especially because the Belles did the opposite and I swear I wasn't prepared for this. Instead, I'll return to a favourite, hackneyed expression I probably used to death in the 1980s: 'it was a welcome breath of stale air.' All of a sudden, I though I was listening to a classic valve pre/power combination. And while many of you might find this a cause of consternation – especially when the primary source was digital – I found myself as content and vindicated as a chocoholic who welcomed back the revived Wispa.

Gone was an inherent, if occasionally tolerable harshness we've grown used to

ABOVE: 22A uses rotaries for balance and volume, sequential switch to scroll through inputs. 'Mon' chooses a conventional output or home-theatre throughput

over the decades. Moving from vinyl to CD, with Tom Petty's rootsy new album *Mojo*, everything seemed slightly softer, warmer than through the Quad 909, for example – and that's hardly a harsh-sounding amplifier. His voice had – I swear – the same texture and presence I last heard on the vinyl of the Travelling Wilburys' first album.

SINGING ITS PRAISES

Before you turn the page because you didn't expect *Antiques Roadshow*, I must stress that this was accompanied by traits that will prevent anyone from mistaking the combo for, say, a Radford SC22 and a pair of MA15s. It has deep, well-extended bass, not quite as snap/slap tight as the 150A v1, but certainly up to the task of dealing with the powerful lower registers of Tom Jones' astonishing gospel effort, *Praise & Blame*. As a combined effort of old and new, the effect was like one of those amazing Italian pasta dishes which baffle you when you find out that there were – genuinely – only three ingredients.

That solid bass, the requisite weight demanded of modern audiences, the decay that suggests an analogue source and Jones' vocal richness might have you wondering if *Praise & Blame* was actually a great lost album from 1968, not a fresh-as-a-this-morning's-bagel product

BETTERING AN 'A' GRADE

Tony Sallis, Belles' UK distributor, played a role in the development of the 150A into the 150A v2, working with designer and company founder Dave Belles. He explained that, 'The main differences are a new main circuit construction using dual, matched, high-quality J-FETs/bipolars in a cascaded differential pair. We achieve an ultra-low noise floor with a final stage using eight power MOSFETs in a brand-new and very robust design operating in Class B.

'The main toroidal transformer has been uprated for lower EMI/RFI emissions, with an improved core, though it's now lower power at 675VA as opposed to 1kVA. The transformer is genuinely a much improved unit, evident by the better bass control and depth, sweeter top end and improved musical flow. As a result, the amp is also 4.5kg lighter!'

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER



ABOVE: Utterly straightforward connections, the 22A pairing everything for two main outs, five line sources and tape in/out. 150A adds a 12V trigger and a mono XLR input to conventional speaker terminals and RCA inputs

of a modern studio. What all this adds up to, especially when you factor in a convincing soundstage – in all three dimensions – is a system that you want to listen to for hours on end. It's the sort of irresistible invitation I get from Audio Research's sub-100W/channel compact stereo amplifiers, from CD players or DACs with valve output sections, from small electrostatic loudspeakers like Stax ELS F-81s.

Surprises came from unlikely sources. Ordinarily, I approach Vegas-era Elvis the way I would a colonoscopy. The man should have retired in '62. On the recently remastered and repackaged *On Stage* from 1970, the spread of the backing vocals, the flow of the band, and yes, that unbelievable voice rendered even 'Release Me' as a tolerable experience. Every single note came through with such authority that, despite the utter absence of the clinical, one could marvel at something often denied vintage gear: retrieval of the lowest level of detail. And that's from a live recording.

MEMPHIS BLUES

Studio Elvis, however, is another matter entirely, and a year earlier, he cut sessions in Memphis, released uniformly with the Vegas swill. Who would have thought that bloated and jaded Elvis had been preceded by a singer who could un-schmaltz (or should that be de-schmaltz?) the usually lame 'Gentle On My Mind'? Loping bass, rich strings, sharp guitar and airy vocals back the King on this

performance, which the Belles present as a deliciously of-a-whole panorama, probably to prepare me for one of my permanent 'All Time 10 Worst Elvis Songs'.

His take of 'Hey Jude' was surely a result of his dislike, fear and envy of the Beatles. So he butchered one of their genuine masterpieces: the actual lyrics, their order, his delivery. It's probably the most execrable-ever cover of a Beatles song by a world-class performer, one who could have made it magical.

With the Belles system, something bizarre happened: even though I knew I would cringe with every note, some utterly peculiar, wholly irrational force kept me rapt, as if it would suddenly improve. As the line says, 'Take a sad song and make it better.' It didn't. It was still a truly vile performance.

But it sounded great. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

A two-year gap is not conducive to recalling the exact sound of a system, but my notes suggest that this package is a tad more romantic, less clinical than the earlier pair. If that means 'more valve-like', hey, it's what many prefer. The lack of a phono stage is easily addressed, the absence of balanced XLRs on the preamp inconsequential. What isn't insignificant is nearly the same performance for £1700 less.

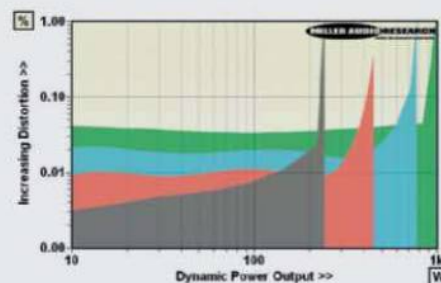
Sound Quality: 78%



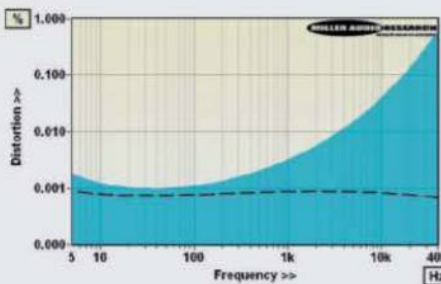
BELLES 22A/REF. 150A v2 (E2500/E2300)

The differences between Belles' original 150A [HFN, Mar '08] and this v2 model are subtle but effective. The amplifier still delivers way over its modest 125W specification at 2x200W/8ohm and 2x330W/4ohm – fractionally less than that achieved by the original if only because the new 700VA transformer is a little smaller than its 1kVA forebear. Nevertheless, the superior screening and reduced noise of this new supply improves the 150A's A-wtd S/N by a full 10dB to 88dB (re. 0dBW). Meanwhile the amplifier's *dynamic* output is improved as the 150A now delivers a huge 243W, 450W, 770W into 8, 4 and 2ohm loads without the old 250W limit into 1ohm [see Graph 1, below]. Into 1ohm, the 150A v2 offers a huge 1kW – not bad for a '125W amp'! Bias current is increased along with its idle power consumption (60W from 37W) but distortion has been reduced from ~0.01% to ~0.005% (midband frequencies) over the first 100W of its range.

The 150A still benefits from a very low 0.009ohm output impedance alongside an 'engineered' high treble roll-off amounting to -0.45dB/20kHz and -5.6dB/100kHz. The partnering 22A pre is similarly inclined with a -0.2dB/20kHz roll-off, very wide 94dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV) and impressively low distortion of <0.0009% from 5Hz to 40kHz. The maximum 25V/100ohm output is also very generous but the ~55dB stereo separation looks weak in comparison with these other textbook figures. Readers are invited to view comprehensive QC Suite test reports for The Belles 22A preamp and Reference 150A v2 power amp by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'download' button. PM



ABOVE: Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads.



ABOVE: Distortion vs. frequency from 5Hz to 40kHz for 150A v2 at 10W/8ohm (blue trace) vs. 22A preamp at 0dBV/60kohm (black, dashed trace)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Power output (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	200W 330W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	243W 450W 770W 1kW
Output impedance (20Hz–20kHz)	0.009–0.07ohm (22A; 97ohm)
Freq. resp. (pre/power, 20Hz–100kHz)	+0.0 to -3.8dB/+0.0 to -5.6dB
Input sensitivity (pre/power)	236mV (0dBV)/135mV (0dBW)
A-wtd S/N ratio (pre/power)	94.0dB (0dBV)/87.5dB (0dBW)
Distortion (pre/power, 20Hz–20kHz)	0.0004–0.0009%/0.001–0.15%
Power consumption (Idle/Rated o/p)	61W/480W (22A; 30W)
Dimensions (WHD, pre/power)	432x89x305/432x133x419mm

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Benz Micro Glider SL (£745)

With several updates over the years, the Swiss company's long-established mid-price moving-coil cartridge still looks as competitive as ever...

Review: **Steve Harris** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Many audiophiles become quite nervous in the presence of a naked phono cartridge, and sometimes with good reason. Perhaps they once had a vinyl love affair that was terminated abruptly by a fatal accident to an exposed cantilever, and have been scarred by the experience. Ever afterwards, they will prefer cartridges which reveal no more than necessary, their cantilever and stylus put forth demurely, like an ankle showing under an Edwardian skirt. Show them the whole works exposed, and they'll turn away with a shudder.

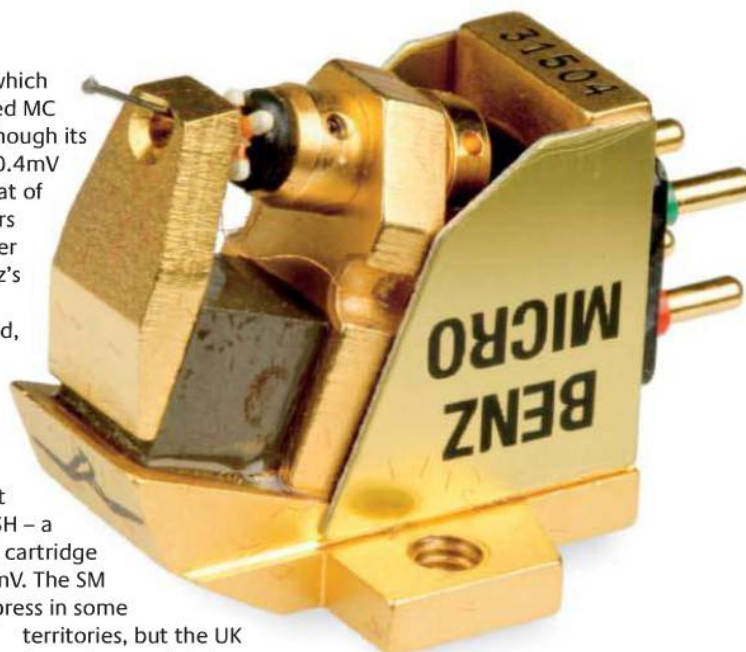
PLAIN FAVOURITE

Assuming you don't suffer such inhibitions, there are plenty of unclothed moving-coil cartridges to choose from, but Benz Micro's Glider is a long-established favourite. If you are still worried about catching your sleeve on the stylus, it may be worth bearing in mind that Benz Micro's re-tipping and repair service costs much less than that of some other brands. Currently, a factory rebuild for the Glider would cost around £300, and the charge for the more expensive models in the range is still held down to around double that.

Benz's most recent revisions led to the designation Glider SL, and the cartridge reviewed here. This is a nominally

low-output MC which needs a dedicated MC phono input, although its rated output of 0.4mV is higher than that of many competitors and slightly higher than that of Benz's upper-range models, or indeed, earlier Gliders.

Available also are the medium-output Glider SM, with output quoted at 0.8mV, and the SH – a true high-output cartridge giving around 2mV. The SM has had a good press in some



territories, but the UK importer says it is less in demand here than the other two. Perhaps this isn't surprising, as the SL's healthy output will be ample with any current MC phono stage and, if you really want

to use an MM input, you can go for the SH.

Over the years, Benz seems to have trickled down its various generator and suspension design refinements from earlier high-end models. The Glider LS does not share the ruby plate coil former, first introduced on the Ruby model itself and used in the LP-S, but it does use a Fritz

'Bass was tight and driving while percussion sounds were excellent'

ABOVE: This cartridge is founded on a strong machined aluminium chassis, gold plated to resist corrosion over a long lifetime

Geiger Signature micro-line stylus mounted on a solid boron cantilever of 0.28mm diameter [see box out].

Once installed in the SME 10, it tracked well on my test records. It even made a fair stab at the highest-level cut on the *Hi-Fi Sound* test disc [HFS 75], which sends many respected MCs jumping out of the groove.

BLOOMIN' LOVELY

Connecting it first via the estimable Lehmann Black Cube Decade phono stage, with the Icon Audio PS3 to hand as a fine tube alternative, I settled down to listen. My main cartridge references for comparison were the excellent Ortofon Cadenza Blue and Koetsu Black.

Starting with *Dire Straits* [Vertigo 9102 021], the bass guitar was slightly less prominent than with the Cadenza Blue, with a softer attack, yet with more bloom or character. As so often with this track, the tempo seemed to change subjectively with the change of equipment, the Benz mysteriously a little faster yet still relaxed

GEIGER COUNTING

Early diamond styli had a simple conical tip, but if the 'point' sat comfortably in the groove, it was too fat front-to-back to trace the smallest 'wiggles'. Elliptical styli offered an improvement by having the sides of the tip ground to a smaller radius, but this also reduced the contact area with the groove. Further development brought line-contact styli, which have a tiny radius on the edge, to follow groove modulations accurately, but a relatively huge radius or contour when viewed from the front, extending the contact area vertically.

There have been many variations on this theme but now, for all but its cheapest models, Benz Micro has virtually standardised on the Swiss stylus specialist Fritz Geiger's 'micro-line' FG-S, with tip radii of 5x120µm. Benz also uses this stylus for re-tipping older models returned for service.



LAB REPORT

BENZ MICRO GLIDER SL (£745)

With a bodyweight of just 6.8g, the Glider SL is physically lighter than the Benz MC LP-S [HFN, Aug '09] but its higher 21cu compliance ensures it's just as suited to use with medium effective mass tonearms. Its softer suspension allows the Glider SL to improve on the LP-S's already excellent tracking, sailing through the 80µm test band. RIAA-corrected harmonic distortion is just 0.15% at 300Hz (+6dB re. 5cm/sec), increasing to 0.3% at +9dB, 0.6% at +12dB and just verging on mistracking at the toughest +18dB groove where THD approaches 1%. The LP-S had hit 10% at this point and at a higher 2g downforce so the Glider's better performance at a lower 1.8g bodes well for reduced record wear. The Glider has a boron cantilever and 5x120µm diamond but close inspection revealed a slight excess of glue on the tip [see main picture]. VTA is still spot-on at 22°, however, so the stylus remains accurately aligned.

Like other Benz Micro MCs, the Glider SL is wired phase-inverting so you might care to correct polarity at the amplifier or speaker terminals. Its distortion trend (versus frequency) is also familiar – a feature of the 'pure iron cross coil' generator, perhaps [see Graph 2]. Otherwise its response is impressively flat to within ±0.5dB up to 2kHz with some slight reinforcement of the presence region thereafter [see Graph 1, below], a trend maintained into a wide 100ohm-47kohm. Standard MC phono inputs will likely make the best of the Glider's ~550µV output, however. Readers may view a QC Suite test report for the Benz Micro Glider SL by navigating to www.hifinews.co.uk and clicking on the red 'Download' button. PM



ABOVE: As usual, Benz Micro's wood box includes an individual frequency response chart as well as brush, screwdriver and spirit level

and unhurried, as if Knopfler had all the time in the world to put over his lyrics and guitar mastery. His guitar had a truly singing tone, too.

Then I went back a decade to Albert King and *Live Wire Blues Power* [Stax SXATS 1002], recorded in concert at the Fillmore West in 1968. King's set has a fantastic sense of occasion, his rich vocals and fabulous guitar sound coming to life with a really vibrant feeling of the venue, and the Benz really allowed the music to flow. By comparison, I felt that the Ortofon could sound more overtly detailed in the mid and treble and give a deeper and firmer bass. But it tended perhaps to be more admirable than lovable.

From the first drumbeats of 'The Changeling' on *LA Woman* [Elektra K42090], I felt that the Benz Micro really delivered the incredibly intense, close-knit and focused sound of The Doors. The bass was tight and driving while the percussion sounds were excellent.

MEANING 'N' SUBSTANCE

Still running the Glider with the Lehmann phono stage, I put on Jennifer Warnes' 'Runaway Horse' from Rob Wasserman's *Duets* [GRP 97 121] and found a fine sense of space. Listening via the Icon PS3 phono amp instead, the cartridge gave a possibly more inviting sound, though Wasserman's string bass became less authoritative. Yet the mellower Icon suited the next track well, bringing Dan Hicks's zany 'Gone With The Wind' vocal to life in its every nuance. Cheryl Bentine's 'Angel Eyes' seemed more listenable than usual, as for once I found myself hearing beyond the swooping sonics and into the song's meaning.

Again, on Brubeck's *Time Out* [CBS 62068], the Glider produced a sound that was a little warmer, if less remarkably detailed on percussion for example. With the Icon phono

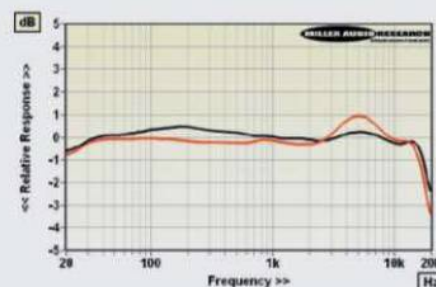
stage, Brubeck's single-note lines on 'Strange Meadow Lark' had real substance, and when he moved into chords the effect was tender. There was a slightly laidback and perhaps flattering quality compared with the Lehmann, which by contrast allowed the Glider SL to highlight the detail in drummer Joe Morello's crisp cymbal and snare sounds, and give full weight to those big 'bombs' that he drops on 'Take Five'.

Picking a classical disc almost at random, I lighted on Rachmaninov's second symphony with Previn and the LSO from 1973 [ASD 2889]. Here the Glider SL transmitted the full power of the gigantic opening chords, and the melancholy sweep of the first theme. At the expense of a slightly more distant perspective and some loss of image focus and transient attack, switching the Icon phono stage calmed this bright EMI recording down and allowed the Glider SL to make this music even more enjoyable. ☺

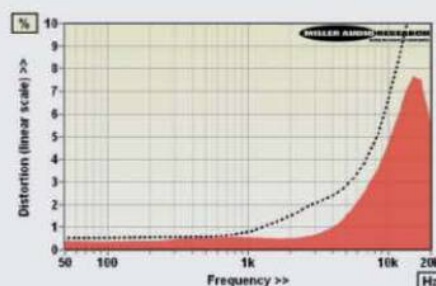
HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Disarming almost any criticism based on 'hi-fi' criteria, the Glider SL somehow manages to project the music seamlessly, as a whole entity. If its nakedness bothers you, for £200 more you can have it with a wood body, and this will still be good value. The Glider SL is warmly recommended, but be warned. Its merits might tempt you, sooner or later, to spend a lot more and enjoy the sheer magic of the Benz Micro LP-S.

Sound Quality: 83%



ABOVE: Left (black) and right (red) freq. responses, lateral groove modulation at -8dB re. 5cm/sec



ABOVE: Left (black) and right (red) tracing and generator distortion (2nd-4th harmonics) versus frequency from 50Hz-20kHz (-8dB re. 5cm/sec)

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Generator type/weight	Moving coil / 6.8g
Recommended tracking force	1.6-2.0mN (1.8mN)
Sensitivity/balance (re. 5cm/sec)	550µV / 0.47dB
Compliance (vertical/lateral)	21cu / 20cu
Vertical tracking angle	22 degrees
L/R Tracking ability	>80µm / >80µm
L/R Distortion (-8dB, 20Hz-20kHz)	0.59-10% / 0.49-5.4%
L/R Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-2.4 to +0.5dB / -4.4 to +1.0dB
Stereo separation (1kHz / 20kHz)	41dB / 28dB

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Pro-Ject DAC Box USB (£140)

Keeping track of Pro-Ject's mammoth 'Box Design' series is an exercise in itself and the range has just got bigger with the arrival of this dinky USB DAC
 Review and Lab: **Paul Miller**

Not content with mopping-up a significant proportion of the enthusiast turntable market, Pro-Ject is quietly cornering the aftermarket add-on box scene. With solutions including headphone and RIAA phono preamps, turntable power supplies, iPod docks, mini Class D amps and even a tuner, then a variety of partnering DACs, all housed in its familiar 'Box Design' livery, was both inevitable and desirable.

We've already featured Pro-Ject's DAC Box FL [HFN Nov '09] and its first USB DAC [HFN Jan '09] but this £140 'DAC Box USB' is its most versatile and universal digital Box to date. Sure enough, there are no switchable filter options or balanced outputs but it does accommodate three (USB, optical and coaxial) digital sources up to 24-bit/96kHz via S/PDIF and 48kHz via USB 1.1. And unlike its frankly inferior self-powered £105 'USB Box', this DAC Box USB is juiced-up via an encapsulated wall-wart.

Moreover, its USB interface is no mere afterthought. Quite the reverse, as my lab tests showed low-level resolution via USB is actually marginally superior to the conventional S/PDIF inputs. Even the perennial bugbear of digital audio – jitter – is lower via USB (220psec versus 560psec with 48kHz data). This presumes, of course, that you take Pro-Ject up on its



ABOVE: Three blue LEDs on the fascia indicate which input is selected – USB, optical or coaxial S/PDIF

offer to download the FooBar2000 media player from its website, thereby avoiding any hidden sample-rate conversion undertaken by the Windows Kernel Mixer in PC-based music systems.

NO CHEAPSKATE

Affordable it may be, but the sound of the DAC Box USB is far from 'budget' in its rendering of acoustic space and detail. I used two sources – the S/PDIF digital output of a Marantz SA-KI Lite [full review in the Dec '10 issue] and the USB connection from my Sony VAIO laptop with FooBar2000 installed – and both yielded very consistent and entertaining results.

'Music delivered via USB was the equal of coax or optical'

Sure enough, the DAC Box USB is mildly flustered by the deepest and most robust of bass lines but neither does it sound thin or weedy. The percussive intensity of Michael Hedges' 'Rikki's Shuffle' certainly left little to the imagination, the transient edge of his metal-stringed guitar a counterpoint to the far softer and warmer tone of his voice.

Its imaging is impressively precise too, as evidenced by the tightly focused quality

of Gwyneth Herbert's vocals in 'Annie's Yellow Bag' [All the Ghosts; Naim CD135]. The central placement of her voice remained tangible even when the backing instrumentation busied-up towards the conclusion of the track.

Unusually, music delivered via USB was the equal of standard S/PDIF. Both resist grasping the nettle of densely-populated recordings but, equally, both interfaces have the capacity to paint a spacious and involving picture with sensitively-recorded acoustic pieces. You'd need to spend a lot more on a PC soundcard to better the performance of Pro-Ject's DAC Box USB. ⚡

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum Output Level/Impedance	980mVrms / 98ohm
A-wtd S/N Ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	95.4dB / 93.1dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBFS/-30dBFS)	0.004% / 0.005%
Distortion (20kHz, 0dBFS)	0.058%
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz)	-0.03dB to +0.03dB (48kHz Fs)
Digital jitter (S/PDIF / USB)	558psec / 220psec
Resolution @ -90dB (S/PDIF / USB)	±1.2dB / ±0.1dB
Power consumption	2W
Dimensions (WHD)	103x36x103mm

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

High quality but affordable USB DACs are rather thin on the ground in our experience, so this new addition to Pro-Ject's 'Box Design' series is very welcome. Offering a clean and articulate sound from uncompressed 44.1/48kHz downloads, the DAC Box USB represents a significant upgrade for the average PC or laptop. It kills Pro-Ject's other USB DAC stone dead.

Sound Quality: 81%



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AMS35i Amplifier	£5999	£1200	£1000

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Vinyl Frontier

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

Bowie's alter ego, a touch of Madness, Kinks and Queen; swindled by the Sex Pistols and a bid to save the Village Green – what has **Chris Heard** been up to this month?

By the artist's own admission it's a strange beast, yet *Station To Station* remains one of David Bowie's most engaging and most oddly satisfying records. Released in January 1976 as Bowie was starring in Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, his 10th album marked a bridging point between the plastic soul of its predecessor *Young Americans* and the German-inspired electronica of *Low*, *"Heroes"*, et al that were to follow.

It also features the last of Bowie's great characterisations in the persona of The Thin White Duke, the impeccably dressed 'emotionless Aryan superman', an aloof figure exuding some favoured Bowie traits – alienation, paranoia – chiming entirely with the nature of his movie character Thomas Jerome Newton and mirroring his own then rapidly unravelling life in LA.

Bowie later admitted that 'there were pieces of me lying all over the floor', and he and his band were able to recount little about the album sessions. Nevertheless, the tracks he cut at Cherokee Studios in late '75, notably accompanied by guitarists Carols Alomar and Earl Slick and co-produced by Harry Maslin, mined a rich vein of creativity and hinted at his forthcoming obsessions with German music, expressionist art, politics and indeed all things emanating from West Berlin.

The quest for a European direction is evident from the opening train rhythms of the Kraftwerk-referencing title track, while elsewhere there is blue-eyed soul ('Golden Years'), jaunty, playful rock-melodrama



➔ The Kinks in '68: 'preserving the Village Green' – first great album

('TVC 15', 'Stay'), and ballads defined by a fragile vulnerability ('Wild Is The Wind', 'Word On A Wing'). Lyrically, Bowie explores his keen interest in religion and the occult, although he would later pronounce that the album was 'devoid of spirit... Even the love songs are detached, but I think it's fascinating'. At the same time, his soon-to-be-collaborator Brian Eno was calling it 'one of the great records of all time'.

Judge for yourself – EMI has spared no expense in re-issuing a deluxe box set of the album, taken from the analogue masters, containing three heavyweight vinyl LPs (including the much-bootlegged Nassau Coliseum live show), five CDs, a DVD and shedloads of memorabilia.

ON THE VILLAGE GREEN

It's one of the most enjoyable stories in all of pop: in 1968, as students rioted around the globe and the summer-of-love optimism mutated into a darker era defined by radical politics, Black Power and Vietnam, The Kinks decided to make a feelgood concept album about the old disappearing ways of England – draught beer, Desperate Dan, china cups and strawberry jam.

On its title track, Ray Davies proudly proclaims 'We are the Village Green Preservation Society', then pleads 'God save Tudor houses, antique tables and billiards'. 'Street Fighting Man' it ain't. Little wonder, then, that the album's prescient nostalgia for all things Empire-related bemused many listeners on its release and was only later recognised as

CHRIS HEARD

Chris Heard is co-owner of Classic LPs, one of the UK's biggest in-stock retailers of vinyl re-issues and new releases. With his wife Rachel, he also runs Three Black Feathers Records, the UK's newest audiophile vinyl label. See www.classiclp.co.uk and www.threeblackfeathers.co.uk for more information on the online store and the label.



being ahead of its time. Remember, it was not until the 1990s that John Major's 'Back To Basics' posturing extolled the virtues of warm bitter, maids cycling to church and, yes, village greens!

Despite their track record of blisteringly fine singles, The Kinks had never made a truly great album until *Village Green*; this was the closest they came to a *Sgt Pepper* or a *Beggars Banquet*. The Kinks Are The Village Green Preservation Society has been remastered and expanded on two Sanctuary LPs to include stereo and mono mixes and rare and unreleased material including demos and BBC sessions.

A STEP BEYOND

As it happens it's not a bad month at all for quintessentially English albums: *One Step Beyond* by Madness is also getting a re-issue – 30 years or so after its original release – on a desirable double 10in in a gatefold sleeve with original artwork [Size 12 Records]. They may have used the ska revival as their vehicle, but Suggs & Co always belonged in the broader scope of great English, and indeed great *London*, songwriting in the tradition of Ray Davies, Ian Dury, Paul Weller (and later Damon Albarn and Pete Doherty).

One Step Beyond still fizzles with vitality, be it the irresistible dance-stomp of the title track, the sweet melancholia of 'My Girl', or the chirpy music hall-meets-Carry On feel of 'In The Middle Of The Night' or 'Bed And Breakfast Man'. The band would go on to hone their pop craft successfully on other decent long-players – *Absolutely* and *7* are also released as part of this series – but nothing quite matched the imagination, flair or sheer joie-de-vivre of their debut: the nuttiest sound around.

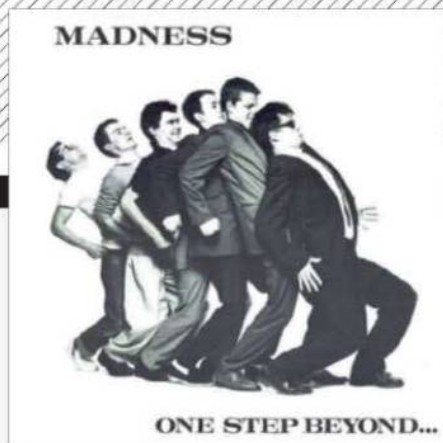
SIX QUEENS TOGETHER

EMI is forging ahead with its mission to re-issue all of Queen's studio catalogue on premium vinyl, with a final batch of six titles, all faithfully reproducing the original content and artwork, including gatefold sleeves where appropriate. The pick of the

STATIONTOSTATIONDAVIDBOWIE



➔ Bowie as the 'Thin White Duke' in *Station To Station* – a deluxe set



➔ *One Step Beyond* a double 10in gatefold re-issue from the 1970s

crop is arguably *Jazz*, the band's seventh album from 1978 which gave the world 'Fat Bottomed Girls', 'Bicycle Race' and the singalong 'Don't Stop Me Now'.

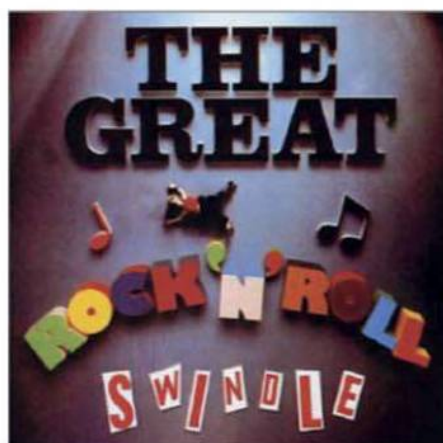
Other highlights are *The Works* (1984, featuring 'Radio Ga Ga'); *The Miracle* (1989, 'I Want It All'); and 1980's *The Game*. The dance-pop workout *Hot Space* (1982) and 1995's final album *Made In Heaven* make up the numbers.

While UK collectors' interest in Queen appears to have peaked some time ago, their global blue-chip status seems assured, so these limited pressings will not be on the shelves for long.

THE MCGARRIGLES AND FRIENDS

I was lucky enough to be at the Royal Albert Hall in December when Kate McGarrigle played what would turn out to be her farewell show, shortly before she succumbed to cancer. Her boisterous spirit and maverick approach to life and music are captured to some extent on *The McGarrigle Hour*, a 1998 collaboration with producer Joe Boyd, now reissued on high-grade double vinyl by Rykodisc.

Boyd had last worked with Canadian Kate and her sister Anna in 1977, soon after they had emerged on the international folk and roots scene following Linda Ronstadt's recording of Anna's 'Heart Like A Wheel'. *The McGarrigle Hour* unites



➔ *The Great Rock 'N' Roll Swindle* – a hotchpotch of 'infectious anarchy'



the sisters with Kate's ex-husband Loudon, their precocious offspring Rufus and Martha Wainwright, and family friends Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris, among others, singing a selection from the American and French Canadian songbooks in a series of informal recordings that Boyd recalled took little over a week to complete. The titles are evocative of a mythical America – 'Talk To Me Of Mendocino', 'Johnny's Gone To Hilo', 'Alice Blue Gown' – and there is a warmth and authenticity about the songs and the dynamics of the performers that is undeniable; they speak of hearth and home but are never cloying.

A natural spark between the singers confirms that here was a great latter-day folk dynasty, relaxed and at the top of its game.

'My most vivid memory is of Kate, Loudon, Rufus and Martha standing around the piano while third sister Janie accompanied them on Irving Berlin's "What'll I Do?"' said Boyd. '[It] shows the breadth of her extended family's unique command of so many genres of North American music.'

ANARCHIC LOOSE ENDS

Musically it is something of a hotchpotch, but as a vinyl artefact *The Great Rock 'N' Roll Swindle* [Virgin] was always one of the touchstones of punk, tying up the loose ends of rock's greatest-ever short, sharp-shock story and offering occasional lucid insights into just how it was that

➔ EMI has remastered six Queen albums on premium vinyl: interest in the band remains strong on the continent

the Sex Pistols came to change the rules of the game forever. Where *Never Mind The Bollocks* was lean and stripped back, this double album can seem bloated and pompous – Malcolm McLaren's Svengali role takes on too much prominence, perhaps – but the general mood of anarchy is infectious and there are moments to enjoy, especially when the band tear into a series of proto-punk standards ('Substitute',

'No Lip', 'Roadrunner', 'Steppin' Stone', 'Johnny B Goode') during some of the most raucous rehearsals ever taped.

AND THAT'S ALL...

By way of contrast, a real gem for audiophiles

to finish with this month, as Boxstar turns its attentions to the teenybop crooner Bobby Darin with the release of *That's All*, his double Grammy-winning second album from 1959, widely thought to be his best work. Remastered from the analogue mono masters by Kevin Gray at Acoustech Mastering, it was originally produced by the legendary Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler, and contains classics such as 'Beyond The Sea' and 'I'll Remember April'.

Oh, and since you ask, yes: it also features Darin's signature tune, the mighty 'Mack The Knife'. All together now, 'Oh the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear...' 🐡

EMI has spared no expense in re-issuing the Bowie box set'

Vinyl Release

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

Van Halen: *Van Halen (180g vinyl)*

Van Halen's debut went Top 20 in the US, making it one of the most successful ever. Some ten years later, **Steve Sutherland** meets a distressed lead guitar player

Next door in the dressing room there's a good old fashioned food fight underway. Plates of sandwiches, grapes, bananas, apples, bowls of M&Ms (no brown ones!) hurtle this way and that accompanied by the sound of much riotous laughter, the loudest of which by far is the throaty guffaw of a man called David Lee Roth who likes to refer to himself as Diamond Dave and who, being nearly 30 years old and currently touring his sixth LP, really should know better by now.

But in here, in this tiny concrete cloakroom, there's blood on the walls and a grown man crying his eyes out, his knuckles seeping from punching the brickwork. This is Eddie Van Halen, at this point in time – 1984 to be precise – the world's most fabulous guitar player.

Eddie's so fabulous, in fact, that when the biggest pop star in the known universe, Mr Michael Jackson, was looking for someone to add a solo onto a track called

'Beat It' that he was planning for his next album, he had his producer Quincy Jones call Eddie in.

BRICKING IT

Which is why it's somewhat alarming that Eddie should be pounding those trillion dollar pinkies of his into a bloody mush right before our eyes and almost as alarming that none of his bandmates seems to give the slightest toss.

'I hit walls when I get mad,' Eddie slurs by way of explanation. Evidently he's one morose drunk. 'My wife Valerie, she talked me into using my feet...' He grins sheepishly. 'I broke three toes so I went back to my hand... At least until my foot heals. I get, y'know, frustrated...'

He trails off, a pitiful sight, bare-chested, sweaty, hunched over and sobbing.

'The band fought Eddie tooth and nail not to record "Jump"'

STEVE SUTHERLAND

Steve edited NME from 1992-2000, the Britpop years, launching NME.com and reviving the NME Awards. Previously he was Assistant Editor on Melody Maker. Among his many adventures he has been physically threatened by Axl Rose, hung out awhile with Jerry Garcia and had a drink or two with Keith Richards...



Er, not to pry or anything Eddie, but what the bejiggers could the problem be? You're Wacko Jacko's go-to guy and Van Halen have just scored their biggest hit ever, the effervescent, irresistible 'Jump' cruising, cocky as you like, straight to the top of the Billboard charts.

'I'm obsessed with music,' he mumbles. Then he burps. 'And sometimes things don't go right.' He goes on to tell me that the band grade each show they play and

that tonight, here in the snowbound Buffalo Memorial Auditorium in upstate New York, before 16,000 baying good ol' boys and their

squealing pneumatic babes, they achieved a 'six instead of 10 plus.'

'I'm supposed to be guitar hero Joe Bitch,' he whines on... 'I don't want to cause any more trouble than I already have by writing music. That's what it boils down to. I get frustrated because I have so many things that I wanna do, that I just wanna get out. I don't give a f*** if they sell, if people like it or not, I just wanna goddamn get it out of me. It's like taking a piss – my bladder's hurting. I just want it out. D'you understand?'

Well, I've heard it put more poetically but... yeah, I tell him, I understand.

DUMB SUCKERS

What brought all this on, it transpires, is that not only did the rest of the band fight Eddie tooth and nail not to record 'Jump' because it was keyboard based and, in Diamond Dave's opinion, not in keeping with the band's image, but now they're sniping at him for his extra-curricular work with Jacko which, they claim, deflects from the focus of the band.

Not to mention the fact that Eddie donated his contribution for free, a fact that Dave thinks makes their whole outfit look like dumb suckers.

So the long and the short of it is this: Eddie's in here bawling, an outcast from



Van Halen hit the stage – (l-r) Eddie Van Halen (guitar), David Lee Roth (vocals), Michael Anthony (bass) and Alex Van Halen behind the drums



➔ Priced £15.99, the 180g re-release of *Van Halen* is available to order online from www.classicplps.co.uk

his own group and deeply disillusioned with the whole fame game, while his compadres, who now resent him and his genius, are whooping it up like a bunch of horny high schoolers on summer break.

ONSTAGE ANTICS

It wasn't always this way. Back in 1978, when they'd just ceased to be Mammoth and became Van Halen, and started to pull in the crowds around Gazzara's and the Whisky a Go Go on the Strip, it was one for all and all for one and the world was theirs for the taking. No less a personage than Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page was declaring Eddie, 'very dazzling... the most significant new kid on the block.' And while his technique of tapping – using both hands to play the strings on the guitar neck – was both innovative and pleasingly theatrical, Dave's onstage antics were also getting the band noticed. *Rolling Stone* magazine delighted in declaring him 'the most obnoxious singer in human history.'

All this skill and spunk was brilliantly captured by veteran rock producer Ted Templeman on the band's eponymous debut album, re-released now on vinyl.

Recorded at the end of 1977 in LA's Sunset Sound Studios, they took a week to lay down Eddie's guitar and a further two weeks to coax Dave's wheeze and croak into acceptable vocals. There was hardly any double-tracking or over-dubbing, the band insistent the finished product should reflect as closely as possible the raucous and raw performance that fans experienced when the band played live.

Highlights, which stand up well today some 32 years on, are the raunchy opener 'Runnin' With the Devil', Eddie's exotic solo extravaganza 'Eruption', their full-on cover of The Kinks' 'You Really Got Me' and 'Ain't Takin' 'bout Love'.

The last track still graces their set to this day, whenever enough members can swallow their pride and harness their egos



for one mo' money-spinning round on the reunion circuit.

Halen, much like AC/DC and, to a certain extent, Aerosmith, are one of those metal bands that you can like even if you find most heavy metal preposterous. There is enough of the roll, as Keith Richards puts it, as well as the rock to feel that this unashamedly good time noise is the very highest art of nonsense.

But back to that dressing room. Diamond Dave says that if I print something he's just said, he'll kill me like a dog. He's trying to explain why Van Halen, the band, are so goddamned top-of-the-world ma and why we Brits are about to fall for them bigtime!

'We can take this parade into a different climate,' he rambles, not a little stoned.

'We're waterproof. You can take us underwater. You can take us in the shower. You can go water-skiing or mountain-climbing with us... even horseriding. We're like a... Tampax. Hey, no, don't write that or I kill you like a dog.'

NOT HEAVY METAL

Meanwhile Eddie is musing on Van Halen's appeal: 'We're not heavy metal,' he insists. 'I'm a *musician*. That's what makes me sick. I haven't changed my hair in the last 10 years. I see no reason to. The way I am as a person and the way I play and the music I make shouldn't come across by the way I look...' He pauses and looks around

him. Shakes his head. 'I don't know what the f*** I'm talking about.'

A road manager appears in the doorway and informs Eddie that it's time to pack up and leave for the hotel. Eddie wants to know what booze is left that he can take back with him. The road manager brandishes a bottle of brandy in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other.

'I'll take both,' Eddie slurs. The road manager frowns at him long and hard.

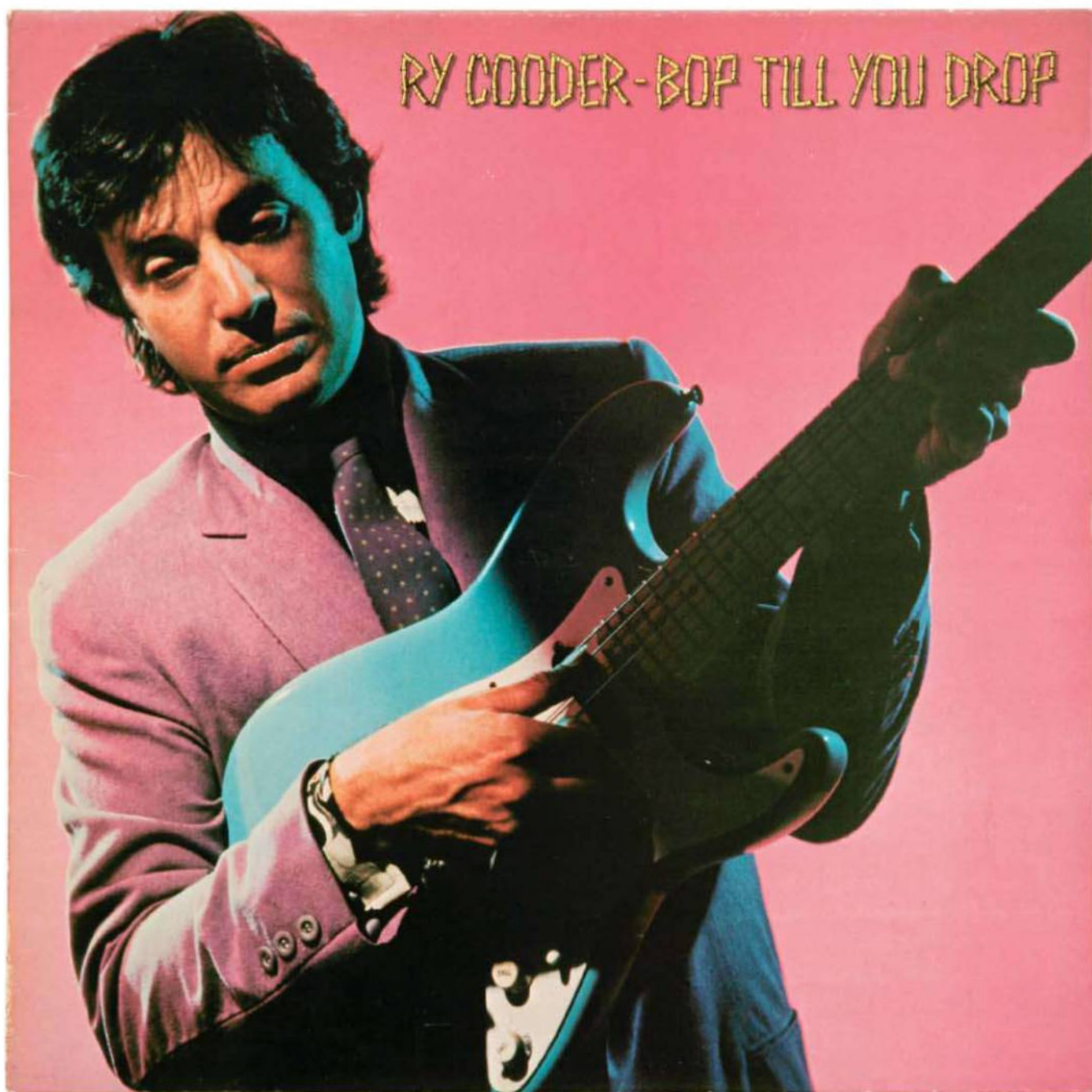
'OK,' grins Eddie, like a chastened schoolboy, 'I'll take that.' He reaches for the vodka then turns and grins at me, 'It's a bigger bottle,' he laughs. ☺

RE-RELEASE VERDICT

Eddie Van Halen, one of two 'Fast Eddies' from the period (the other Motorhead's Eddie Clarke) remains in exceptional fettle throughout this debut re-release. Remastered at Acoustech by Kevin Gray, with access to the original analogue mastertapes, the sound is raw but not raucous, the level of detail remarkably fine for this period. The blistering virtuosity of 'Eruption' has never sounded so potent, the thrill of those strings surely prompting the oldest of rockers among us to pull out that air guitar one more time. **HFN**

Sound Quality: 89%





Ry Cooder *Bop Till You Drop*

Ry Cooder's eighth studio album occupies a special place in the history of recorded music being the first digitally recorded album ever to be released. Hitting the shelves in 1979 it remains a classic to this day, but was this because of, or despite, its sound?

Words: **Johnny Black**

Guitar guru Ry Cooder's eighth album, *Bop Till You Drop*, released at the very end of July 1979, gave him his first British chart entry, going onto the chart on August the 11th, peaking at No 9, and spending an impressive 36 weeks in the list.

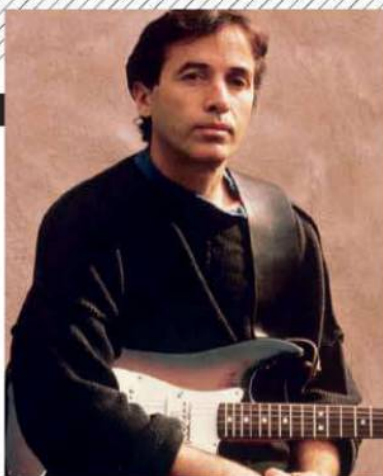
However, it was also a far more significant first, not just for Cooder, but for the music industry as a whole. Why? Because *Bop Till You Drop* was the first digitally recorded popular music album ever to be released, a hi-fi watershed moment if ever there was one.

DELIGHTED WITH DIGITAL

Digital recording had been used for classical albums and Stephen Stills of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young had recorded a digital album before Cooder, but it never saw the light of day. This left the way clear for Cooder to open the digital door with nine tracks recorded on the newly installed 3M 32-track digital recorder at Amigo Studios in North Hollywood, California.

Cooder told *Swing 51* magazine in 1981 that he had been delighted with the digital recording process during the making of the LP.

'They brought one [digital recorder] into Warner Brothers as a prototype and the engineer knew I didn't like 24-track and he says,



RY COODER



➔ Live shot of Cooder from the late '70s and press images from the early '80s – his love for the Hawaiian shirt was later to return

➔ Official Warner Bros press shot from the late 1970s

"Well, this thing is going to solve all the things you don't like about 24-track." I said, "OK! Great! Let's try it." And, of course, as soon as you hear digital playback you know that it's great, that it's terrific and that everything is beautiful. Things sound utterly fantastic.'

A CHANGE OF MIND...

Curiously though, the album's engineer, Lee Herschberg, seemed to remember things a little differently. 'Ry Cooder didn't particularly like the digital aspect,' he said. 'He's not a digital fan – it's not warm enough sounding for him. It was super clean and super quiet, but the top end was different from what anybody had heard... It was unknown on all fronts.'

Herschberg's CV included albums by Randy Newman, Frank Sinatra and Harpers Bizarre, as well as several earlier Cooder albums. He was well thought of as a mixing and mastering engineer, and was as familiar

as anybody in those days with the emerging digital technology. But he wasn't a producer. Given Herschberg's recollection of Cooder's antipathy towards digital, it does seem peculiar that, for a project that was as technologically ground-breaking, Cooder was allowed to self-produce *Bop Till You Drop*. Warner Brothers wasn't short

of great producers, so why wasn't one of their top men put in charge?

Something resembling a partial answer came a couple of years later when Cooder told Stuart Grundy and John Tobler for their BBC book *The Guitar Greats* that, 'I was just a guinea pig, a subject for somebody's carpetbagger engineering notions, I'm afraid. I hate digital.' In the space of two years he seems to have gone from loving digital to hating it.

Cooder's apparent volte-face may be more logical than it first seems, however, because the sound that had so excited him in the studio was not the sound that eventually ended up on the vinyl album.

MASTERING PROBLEMS

According to one insider from the time, 'I was hanging around Warner Brothers' Amiga studios when they were converting from analogue recording to digital recording. This was 1978, so there were no CDs. Lee Herschberg, who

was the lead engineer at the time, talked for hours about how hard it was to get the digital recording to sound right, and complained about the pathetic state of digital mastering. Digital mastering was brand new, and your choices were either a 3M facility in the US that was working but not quite finished, or a Sony facility in Japan. Warner

'The LP was a hi-fi watershed moment if ever there was one'



RY COODER



PRODUCTION NOTES

Legendary producer Snuff Garrett, best remembered for his work with Booby Vee, The Ventures, Sonny & Cher and others, opened Amigo Studios on Compston Avenue, Burbank, North Hollywood, in the mid 1960s. Amigo was then sold to Warners in the '70s, and proved popular with its artists, which included The Doobie Brothers and James Taylor among others.

Randy Newman famously maintained his own personal booth, Randy's Room, off the main studio, where he would hang out during mixing sessions for his albums.

Towards the end of the '70s, it was becoming clear that digital recording would be the way ahead and Amigo was one of the first studios to take the plunge. In partnership with our own beloved BBC, the Mincom division of the 3M company had spent several years researching and developing one of the first digital recording systems. Known to the world as the manufacturers of Scotch sticky tape, 3M had become a leader in magnetic recording tape during the Second World War and was long established in the audio market place with its branded tape media and professional analogue recorders. The outcome of its 1970s research programme was the 3M Digital Audio Mastering System, which comprised a 32-track deck (16-bit, 50kHz audio) running 1in tape and a 4-track, ½in mastering recorder. Both of these decks operated at 45ips, offering 30 minutes of record time from a 7200ft, 12.5in reel or 45-minutes from a 14in, 9600ft spool. There were, as yet, no true 16-bit converters available so, in classic Heath Robinson fashion, the 3M system combined separate 12-bit and 8-bit converters to achieve 16-bit performance.

At a cost of \$150,000, the first four of these systems were installed in early 1979 at Sound 80 in Minneapolis, A&M Studios, the Record Plant and, of course, Amigo in Los Angeles. Pride of place among the early pop releases cut on the 3M system goes to *Bop Till You Drop* and Donald Fagen's *The Nightfly*. In 1980, the Amigo studio was sold to Blood Sweat And Tears founder Al Kooper and renamed The Slammer.



decided to go with 3M, because they could travel there and tweak the process themselves.'

Cooder himself appears to have realised that this was just an interim problem. In the same Grundy/Tobler interview, he went on to say that 'it will come to be a good thing, when we stop having to transfer to analogue disc form, because digital does not transfer. It makes other digitals all right, but if you mix them up, it's apples and oranges, and you end up with practically nothing, which nobody bothered to explain to me at the time.'

RECORDED LIVE

Irrespective of the merits of the original sound quality in the grooves, the music on *Bop Till You Drop* has stood the test of time. Recorded virtually live in the studio, it's no surprise that the playing is impeccable, given that the band Cooder assembled for the sessions included the legendary Jim Keltner on drums, Jackson Browne's estimable sideman David Lindley



on guitar and gospel great the Rev Patrick Henderson on organ. Mention must be made too of Bobby King and Terry Evans, whose superb backing vocals enhance Cooder's naturally weedy voice magnificently, making it sound sweet and soulful.

'What makes the record are the musicians,' reckoned Cooder.

'Getting the right guys in the room at the right time is so often the measure of it all. With a record like this one, it's not so much the songs as what they sound like.'

THE SONGS...

The material consists almost entirely of covers of early R&B and rock 'n' roll classics, including Elvis Presley's 'Little Sister', Solomon Burke's saucy 'Look At Granny Run' and the overlooked Arthur Alexander gem, 'Go Home, Girl'. Soul star Chaka Khan was drafted in to duet with Cooder on the 1965 hit 'Don't You Mess Up A Good Thing'.

'She had just had a baby and was bored staying home,' Cooder explained later, 'so I asked her to sing with me. I'd thought that someday it might be good to do a duet of that song, "Don't You Mess Up A Good Thing", which was by Fontella Bass and Bobby McClure, and Chaka's certainly an extra good singer at that kind of stuff.'

Chaka Khan also added her sparkle to 'Down In Hollywood', the only Cooder-composed track on *Bop Till You Drop*. In the sleeve notes to the 2008 compilation *The UFO Has Landed* [Rhino 515893], Cooder

← Cooder as he appeared in the mid-'80s, pictured with a custom modified Strat guitar

← Original advert for the 3M Digital Mastering System, as used for the recording of the LP. 'It uses computer technology to record every nuance of a piece of music in binary numbers'

← Chaka Khan, who shared vocal duties on two of the album's tracks - 'Don't Mess Up A Good Thing' and the only Cooder-composed song, 'Down In Hollywood'

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Alternate Format Discography



➔ Cooder in 2009 with slide guitar – and Hawaiian shirt

revealed that 'Down In Hollywood' was based on a real-life encounter.

'My first car was a 1947 Packard Clipper, a beautiful car that a family of five in Guatemala could live in comfortably,' he said. 'Leaving the CBS building after a late-night session, I waited at the stoplight at Gower and Sunset. Two street hookers began arguing over who saw me first. One grabbed the passenger door handle and the other grabbed the driver's door handle, and they commenced to shake and rock the big car back and forth. You best not run out of gas in Hollywood.'

STABILITY AND CREATIVITY

Another standout on *Bop Till You Drop* is the unexpectedly gentle and atmospheric instrumental treatment of Ike & Tina Turner's 'It's Gonna Work Out Fine'. 'I copped the idea of the instrumental version from Otis Rush,' Cooder has acknowledged. 'He had that vibrato, tremolo effect that he did, but I thought about it as a bottleneck tune, which seemed like a good idea, and I think it's a real pretty song.'

Speaking about the bluesy 'The Very Thing That Makes You Rich (Makes Me Poor)', Cooder has explained that his long-time musical

collaborator Jim Dickinson, 'knew this cab driver in Nashville, named Sidney Bailey, who wrote songs in between fares. As far as I know, nobody else has recorded his songs, and there are so many good ones. If Sidney had come along in these times, he'd have been hailed as one of those intriguing outsiders.'

For Jim Keltner, part of the secret of Cooder's *modus operandi* is his work ethic. 'He does his work and he goes home,' says Keltner. 'That's rare in a musician, but I think that stability is a real important part of his creativity.'

IN HINDSIGHT...

In retrospect, although Lee Herschenberg felt that the 3M digital recorders he and Cooder used for *Bop Till You Drop* were the best tools for the job at the time, he has conceded that, 'they had a lot of problems building heads for the machines and keeping them in alignment and there were differences of opinion about what proper alignment was, even among 3M techs. And the machines had a propensity for crinkling tape... Recording-wise they were terrific'.

What he particularly liked about digital was that, '...it reproduces exactly what you put in, whereas analogue has a way of changing

things – adding things like compression. It just has a different sound because of the metal heads and things. It has a softening effect; digital does not.'

Ultimately, concluded Herschenberg, 'the biggest drawback was the mastering – we weren't able to master it properly – it had a degree of top end on it that the lathe's cutting heads didn't like. It was a learning process for everyone.'

When the album hit the streets in America, Jay Cocks of *Rolling Stone* magazine reviewed it with no mention at all of how it had been recorded, but he loved what he heard, declaring, it 'not only a record that's different, it's a record that makes a difference.'

Thirty years after the LP's release, those words still ring as true as the day they were written. ☺

For reasons which remain obscure to this very day, Ry Cooder's catalogue is among the most under-exploited in the Warner Bros vaults. Enquiries via the company press office and via Rhino Records, who issued the excellent Cooder compilation *The UFO Has Landed* in 2008, returned only polite apologies accompanying affirmations that even they don't know why. Or maybe they're just not saying.

ORIGINAL RELEASE (1979)

The vinyl version of the LP [BSK 3358 (USA)/W 56691 (UK)] is a prime example of how bad many early digital recordings sounded on vinyl. The record, essentially an exact copy of the master tape, was not treated with any equalizing or limiting during transfer to disc.

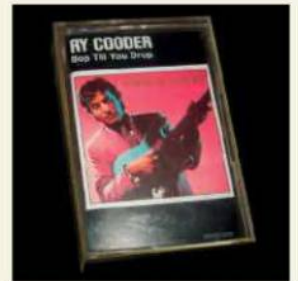
Pete Silverton of *Sounds* was one of several contemporary reviewers who recognised something odd about the sound, as opposed to the actual performances.

'I was initially a little thrown by the texture of the sound,' Silverton said. 'Having heard that Cooder was doing an R&B album and was after that true grit and booze '50s sound, I was expecting something harsh, driving and fraying a little round the edges. Instead – possibly because of the digital recording technique – it's so clean you could dry a baby's bum on it. Clean, that is, and not smooth.'

The problem, it seems, lay with 3M's Digital Audio Mastering System, which was not yet capable of transferring all the detail of the digital recording into the grooves of a black vinyl disc. Even though *Bop...* was recorded live in the studio, the album sounded tinny and lacked life. For example, Cooder's *Into The Purple Valley*, an analogue recording making use of multi-tracking techniques, left *Bop Till You Drop* in the sonic shade.

CASSETTE (1979)

A Dolbyised cassette version of *Bop Till You Drop* [456691] hit the shelves in Germany in



1979, but doesn't seem to have had a wide distribution.

CD RELEASE (1983)

Presumably because of its historical significance as a digitally-recorded album, *Bop...* was one of the earliest releases on CD [7599-27398-2 (USA), 256 691 (Europe)]. This was a significant improvement on the original vinyl, providing the clarity and distinction between the various instruments that was presumably there in the original recording, with a depth of field that had been sadly lacking in 1979.

Thereafter, the trail goes dead and *Bop Till You Drop* was never re-mastered, or accorded a Minidisk, MFSL, SACD or any kind of audiophile release

MINI LP CD

August the 8th, 2007, however, finally provided a heartening sign that things might finally



be starting to move with the release of a Japanese-only limited edition Mini LP format CD [JPN-WPCR-12697]. And, hallelujah, it's been digitally remastered. Regrettably, I can't lay my hands on one, so can't testify to how it sounds.

If, however, it's been treated with the same care as the three tracks on *The UFO Has Landed*, (ie remastered by the revered Grammy-winning Bernie Grundman with Ry and his son's approval), then we can finally hear *Bop...* as intended.

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SUPRAUDIO



DVD



BLU-RAY



VINYL

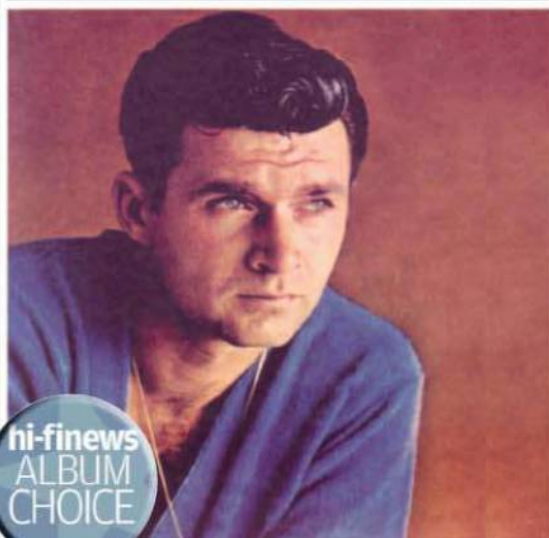


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DICK DALE AND HIS DEL-TONES

SINGLES COLLECTION '61-65

Sundazed
LP 5248



FEATURING ...

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SHAKE-N-STOMP
JUNGLE FEVER
MISERLOU
EIGHT TILL MIDNIGHT
PEPPERMINT MAN
SURF BEAT
A RUN FOR LIFE
LOVIN' ON MY BRAIN
KING OF THE SURF GUITAR
HAVA NAGILA
SURFIN' AND A-SWINGIN'
SECRET SURFIN' SPOT
WILD IDEAS
THE SCAVENGER
THE WEDGE
NIGHT RIDER
MR. ELIMINATOR
THE VICTOR
WILD, WILD MUSTANG
GRUDGE RUN
GLORY WAVE
NEVER ON SUNDAY
WHO CAN HE BE
OH MARIE
LET'S GO TRIPPIN' '65
WATUJI JO

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ALBUM
CHOICE

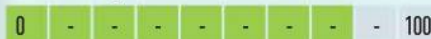
DICK DALE & HIS DEL-TONES

Singles Collection '61-65

Sundazed LP5248 (two discs, mono, 180g vinyl)

While the Beach Boys and Jan & Dean successfully co-opted the 'surf' genre by adding vocals, its inventor was Dick Dale, aka 'King of the Surf Guitar'. Dale launched the genre with 'Let's Go Trippin'' from 1961, which kicks off this set, developing a sound he forged to reflect the sensations of the sport. Along the way he directly influenced so many guitarists (eg Hendrix, Eddie Van Halen) that he's even credited by some with inventing heavy metal. What these 28 mono tracks reveal are ingenious techniques that dazzle and frighten in equal measure 50 years on. He even raunchifies 'Hava Nagila'. Tarantino used Dale's 'Miserlou' in *Pulp Fiction*, reviving a career that need never have faltered. **KK**

Sound Quality: 80%



THE CARS

Shake It Up

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-325 (180g vinyl)

If you enjoyed the gold CD edition, reviewed in March, then the LP will provide some surprises. Although The Cars were born in the analogue era, they embraced an artificial, otherworldly sound, which logic dictates might be favoured by digital. But so rich and layered were their recordings, and so distinctive the vocals, that the music lends itself equally to what should be passé technology in this context. Blessedly, The Cars were not as Fritz Lang-ian in their modernism as, say, the far-quirkier Devo, never allowing melody to be subjugated by studio wizardry, so even the proliferation of synths – which date the album – does not jar with analogue warmth. **KK**

Sound Quality: 83%



NAT 'KING' COLE

Where Did Everyone Go?

Analogue Productions APP 1859-45 (two 45rpm LPs)

As this series of Nat 'King' Cole LPs, pressed on two 45rpm discs, concentrates on his golden era, you know what to expect: perfect sound quality, breathtaking arrangements, tasteful material and that voice. Aaah! That voice! It delivered so much, and was so inimitable that Cole could use it to make any song his own. This release from 1963, the last of a trio of LPs arranged and conducted by Gordon Jenkins, was themed with the subtitle 'Songs of Love And Loneliness'. Cole creates the necessary mood with such completeness that you feel an ache in nearly every note. 'Am I Blue?', 'Say It Isn't So?'... a perfect counter to the more optimistic *Love Is The Thing*. **KK**

Sound Quality: 95%



MARQUISE KNOX

Man Child

Acoustic Sounds APO2022 (180g vinyl)

There have been blues prodigies in the past, young kids who defy their age with a sound conveying wisdom, experience and other abilities which suggest the passage of time. But quite how Knox managed to ingest the anima of a 60-year-old in a 17-year-old's mind/body is part of the mystery that makes this LP so compelling. Had you heard the album before being told this, his interpretation of Willie Dixon's 'You Need Love' would have you convinced the guy had been playing juke joints for decades. When you realise that he composed nearly all of the material, you'll want to see his birth certificate. Exquisite guitar-driven blues that promise much for the future. **KK**

Sound Quality: 90%





COMPACT DISC



SUPERAUDIO



DVD



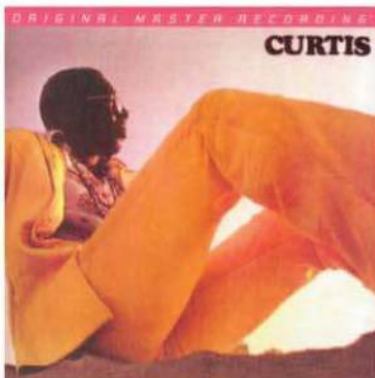
BLU-RAY



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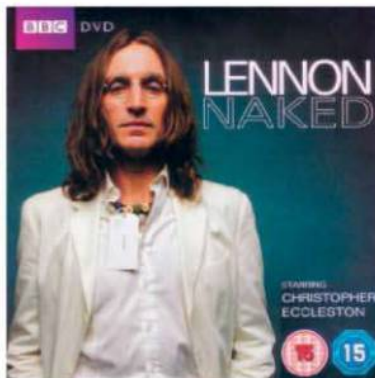
CURTIS MAYFIELD

Curtis

Mobile Fidelity UDCCD781 (Gold CD)

Mayfield was one of the very first soul artists to imbue his songs with serious political content. And this self-produced, solo debut from 1970 melded contemporary soul and R&B with production values rarely glimpsed before, resulting in Mayfield's immediate elevation to the front rank. Overshadowed by masterpieces from Isaac Hayes, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye from the same period, *Curtis* expanded on the ground-breaking work he'd created with the Impressions in the previous decade. Sounding dated only in that it lacks the abrasiveness of the post-rap era, *Curtis* succeeds instead because of its intensity, beauty, intelligence and grandeur. **KK**

Sound Quality: 95%



LENNON NAKED

Starring Christopher Eccleston

Blast! Films BBCDVD3239 (Region 2 DVD)

After last month's *Nowhere Boy*, a sequel (with *Backbeat* in-between) in the life of John Lennon. This BBC effort caused controversy, everyone acknowledging Eccleston's remarkable performance, with some bitching that he's too old for the part. Nonsense! He *looks* more like Lennon than any other actor who'd played him before. More pertinent is the way the story plays fast and loose with the facts, featuring more of Lennon's errant father than actually may have happened. It's still a superior biopic, with only one caveat: the broadcast version included actual Beatles music, while the DVD – which retains Lennon originals – loses them for copyright reasons. **KK**

Sound Quality: 85%



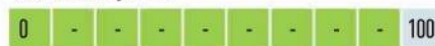
THE ROLLING STONES

Stones In Exile

Eagle Rock EREDV786 (Region 0 DVD)

Part of the lavish vinyl/CD edition of *Exile On Main Street*, this has been made available as a separate purchase for those who didn't buy the luxury box set. It is probably more Stones than you'll ever need or want unless you're truly part of their hardcore following: a documentary running to over two hours dealing with the making of a single album. Admittedly, some consider *Exile* to be their best, so it's no conceit to honour it in the way one would document *Sgt Pepper* or *Blonde On Blonde*. Using amazing footage, and contemporary and new interviews, it tells the entire saga of their most louche period. For historical worth alone, a mile-, er, stone. **KK**

Sound Quality: 88%



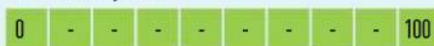
NAT 'KING' COLE

LOVE IS THE THING

Analogue Productions CAPP 824 SA (SACD)

Arguably the finest album of standards he ever delivered – the opener is 'When I Fall In Love', for goodness sake – this stunner sounds so good that Analogue Productions has released it on both 2x45rpm vinyl (to be reviewed soon) and SACD. But not just *any* SACD: its layers are set up so you can enjoy it in mono, stereo, three-channel and, if your processor has worthy rear-channel extraction, in surround. However you choose to play it, the sound is so silky and natural that you'll use this as a demo disc. Of course, this is first and foremost about the music. Cole rarely sounded better, with the signature vocal textures and perfect phrasing suggesting that, yes, he probably was the greatest vocalist of the 20th century. **KK**

Sound Quality: 95%





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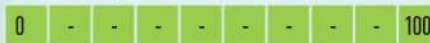
PHIL COLLINS

Going Back

Warner Bros 075678924484

This sparkling Motown homage should come as no surprise to anyone who remembers that Collins' first UK No1 was his 1982 cover of The Supremes' 'You Can't Hurry Love'. It's more a question of why he left it so long. For the most part, he's chosen to faithfully recreate the sound and arrangements of 18 '60s classics, even drafting in members of Motown's revered Funk Brothers session crew to get it spot-on. Even so, the voice is unmistakably Collins, and his passion for the material is unmistakable in the effervescent zip of every track. Stevie Wonder's 'Blame It On The Sun', however, has been nicely re-fashioned, and Dusty Springfield's 'Going Back' is satisfyingly rearranged. Ultimately, every cut's a belter. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 96%



THE SAW DOCTORS

The Further Adventures Of...

Sham Town SAWDOC017

By the time your average band gets around to celebrating its 20th anniversary, they've usually slowed down and are headed out to pasture. Ireland's Saw Doctors, thankfully, have never been your average band, so their seventh studio album is, if anything, more vibrantly tuneful than ever. The core of the band remains intact but the arrival of powerful new drummer Eimhin Cradock has significantly upped their energy levels and his contributions as a songwriter beautifully complement those of founder members Davy Carton and Leo Moran. Shamelessly sentimental, unrepentantly traditional, The Saw Doctors also remain kick-ass rockers and tunesmiths extraordinaire. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 89%



ABE VIGODA

Crush

Bella Union Bellacd256

Welcome to the world of 'alternative tropical punk'. No, I've no idea what it means either, but that's how Los Angeles quartet Abe Vigoda (named after an actor) describe themselves. They don't really hit their stride until the title cut, 'Crush', track 4, but its crazed polyrhythmic intensity forced me to listen more closely to everything that had gone before. It's far from easy-listening but, once you get the hang of it, it's like a thrill ride through a long, twisting, dark cave, from which you emerge with a pounding heart, feeling strangely euphoric. Think Gary Numan meets early Depeche Mode via Talking Heads and you're 25% of the way there. *JBk*

Sound Quality: 85%



STARS AND SONS

Good Morning Mother

Twice Burnt Records TBR001P

This Brighton-based combo get points because on their website it says they 'enjoy sitting on the beach, engaging in semi-meaningful relationships'. So should we all. This debut album was produced by Dave Eringa, famed for his work with everybody from the Manic St Preachers to Kylie. Good man that he is, he's had the good sense to let these eccentric, quintessentially English songwriters breathe, so that their peculiar charms are presented in all their haphazard glory. Get past the kitchen sink racket they kick up and you'll find killer hooks and surprisingly catchy choruses, especially in the frantic tilt-a-whirl rush of 'In The Ocean'. Junkyard magic! *JBk*

Sound Quality: 90%





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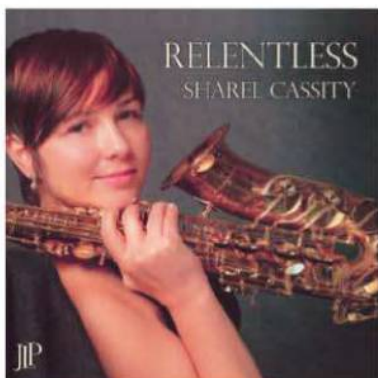
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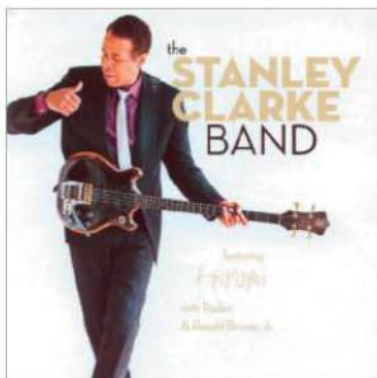
SHAREL CASSITY

Relentless

Jazz Legacy Productions JLP 0901001

Growing up in Oklahoma, Cassity got her first alto saxophone for Christmas at age nine. She moved to New York in 1999 and completed her masters' at Juilliard in 2007. Her 2008 debut *Just For You*, on DW Records, was standards-based, but this time she brings her great energy and technique to originals which enliven their straightahead genre with dextrous metrical trickery. Guest horns swell the ranks on some tracks, but the core quintet includes long-time musical partner Michael Dease, a virtuoso trombonist still imbued with the melody and whimsy of an earlier era. He also wrote the title track, a play on Sharel (pronounce it Sha-REL). Enjoyable. *SH*

Sound Quality: 80%



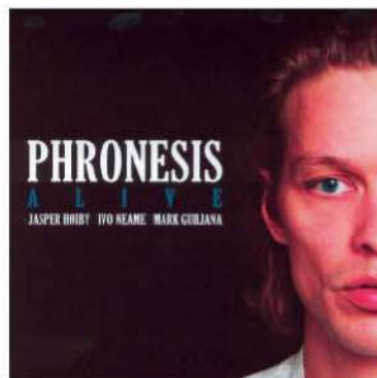
THE STANLEY CLARKE BAND

Featuring Hiromi

Heads Up HUCD 3161

Never content to stand still, Clarke offers another new concept and striking new sonics. His is still the dominant voice, especially leading with his Alembic tenor bass, yet there's an emphasis on group contributions, the tunes direct and even lyrical. Behind him is regular keyboardist Ruslan Sirota, but the main guest is Hiromi, whose pianism soars effortlessly over the electric soundbed on 'No Mystery' and three other tracks. You also hear singer Cheryl Bentine, guitarists Charles Altura and Rob Bacon, and saxist Bob Sheppard. Mixed by Gerry 'The Gov' Brown using 'the Spacialonik process', the sound is big and open, spectacular enough to swim in. *SH*

Sound Quality: 80%



PHRONESIS

Alive

Edition Records EDN1021

Probably Europe's most sought-after bassist, Jasper Høiby has an authority and impact that grabs your attention and holds it. Here his trio Phronesis are heard live at The Forge in London, but with a different drummer: regular Anton Eger couldn't make the dates, so Høiby drafted in American Mark Guiliana, with spectacular results. From the start, in the opening 'Blue Inspiration', Guiliana and the very fine pianist Ivo Neame push each other to greater heights around the sonorous pivot of a simple repeated bass figure. Then, typically, Høiby opens out and the piece blossoms into new shapes. This vibrant, truthful recording captures an exultant musical event. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



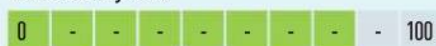
VARIOUS ARTISTS

Larkin's Jazz

Proper Box 155 (four-disc box set)

Between 1961 and 1971, Britain's best-loved poet became Britain's most hated jazz critic, at least by other critics. In his *Telegraph* reviews, Philip Larkin was to Coltrane, Ornette and Miles what Brian Sewell is to Hirst, Emin and Serota. Filling the first two discs here is a treasury of Armstrong, Bechet, Condon and so on, the 78s Larkin loved, if not necessarily the artists' best works. The third and fourth CDs collate items he reviewed and actually liked, mainly reissues. A 54-page book relates every track to the life, the poetry or the reviews. This bumper mixed bag is about the contribution jazz made to Larkin, not the converse, so listen while reading his *All What Jazz*. And remember to pour yourself a large gin and tonic... *SH*

Sound Quality: 80%





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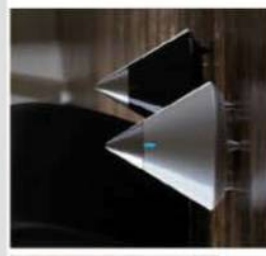
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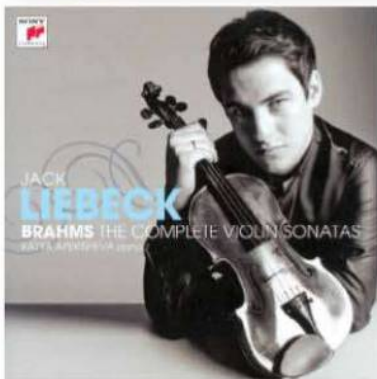
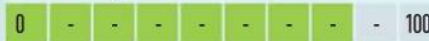
Piano Concertos 1–5

Paul Lewis, BBC Symphony Orchestra/Jiří Bělohlávek

Harmonia Mundi HMC 902053.55 (three discs)

There are parallels with the 1970s Kovacevich cycle: keen young Beethoven pianist (students respectively of Myra Hess/Alfred Brendel) partnered with older, principal conductor of the BBC SO – though Colin Davis had the LSO for No.5. Both soloists opt for glissando octaves at the recapitulation of 1(i), and play the longer Beethoven cadenzas in Nos.1 and 4. Lewis's earnest mastery of these scores is arresting and impressive, notwithstanding a couple of idiosyncratic slowings in the finales of 1 and 2. He is promptly accompanied by the BBC SO, although Bělohlávek fails to create a rapt atmosphere in 5(ii), and his speeding at the very end of No.1 is questionable. *CB*

Sound Quality: 79%



BRAHMS

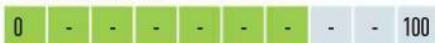
Violin Sonatas 1–3

Jack Liebeck/Katya Apekisheva

Sony 88697623842

It's odd to find Sony, in promoting its young Classical Brit award-winning violinist, issuing recordings made as long ago as December 2007. And the resonant Potton Hall acoustic doesn't add sweetness to the high register of Liebeck's Guarneri instrument – although he's somewhat favoured in the balance, at *forte* the piano sounds lunge forward. There's no doubting his sincerity and engagement with the music but, as with their earlier Dvořák sonatas on Sony (coupled with a lacklustre production of the Violin Concerto), it's the highly developed artistry of pianist Katya Apekisheva that holds the attention more. *CB*

Sound Quality: 65%



ELGAR

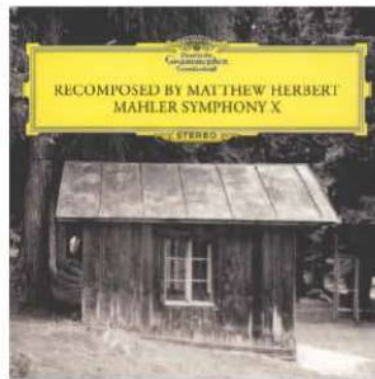
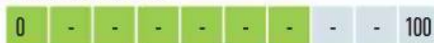
Sea Pictures; Symphony 1

Dame Janet Baker, LPO/Vernon Handley

LPO-0046

One could say that the Janet Baker/Barbirolli EMI recording prompted reappraisal of the *Sea Pictures*, and this live alternative (first published in an earlier LPO set) is an affecting reminder of her unique vocal timbre and musical commitment. From the same 1984 RFH concert, taped by Capital Radio, the First Symphony finds Vernon Handley with 'the bit between his teeth', skimming 3m 30s from his 1979 CfP timing with the London Philharmonic, and missing in particular the tender inwardness of the *Adagio*. Other writers have welcomed this more bitter account; I stand by the 1956 Barbirolli/Hallé Elgar First [SJB1017]. *CB*

Sound Quality: 70%



HERBERT

Mahler Symphony X Recomposed

DG 273 4438

Forget Deryck Cooke: it's not what it says on the tin. For this overblown 'life and death' soundscape Matthew Herbert has sampled Sinopoli's 1987 Philharmonia recording of the Tenth *Adagio*, layering and cutting into it with solo viola (flute, Mahler's 'singing bone', would have been more apt) and ambient sounds at Mahler's graveside and Toblach composing hut. Recordings were made from a hearse and inside a coffin and 'we buried microphones in an urn'. Play the nine tracks out of sequence and the 'unexpected artistic consequences' are your own responsibility, it warns! Such pretentious indulgence ought to make this eligible for a Turner Prize. *CB*

Sound Quality: 40%



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It's a journey that will strike a chord – the search for *that* sound and all the blind alleys encountered along the way. This reader has at last reached a place of sonic serenity, having upgraded over the years from a 78rpm record player to the fabulous system he enjoys today. **Steve Harris** dropped by...

An enthusiast all his life, Lawrie has owned so many classic products that there's hardly room to mention them all.

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'It goes back to the 1950s, and AM radio, and the BBC still playing 78s. When the BBC moved over to microgroove records, I thought, "So it can be improved!" And I've been on a steady drive ever since, trying to make things better and better.'

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'The first record player I got hold of was an old 78 thing that you plugged into the back of a radio. It had steel needles, and you had to change them. But for two shillings and sixpence, I found my first upgrade. It was a sapphire tipped steel needle, and you didn't have to change it. That was the first upgrade of several million.'

'When I started work as an apprentice electronics engineer, I got a Collaro Transcription deck. I built my own amps, the Mullard 5-10 and the Mullard 2 preamp, and the FM tuner that went with it. Then I was lucky enough, for five pounds,

to come across a 12in Goodmans Axiom 150 drive unit. I built various enclosures for it from the Goodmans designs. When I went to stereo in 1961 or 1962, I got a 300, then the current equivalent of the 150, and built a second cabinet.

'By then I'd gone on to Quad amplification. I'd bought the 22 preamp and one II amp first, the second amp later on.

'My turntable used the top Collaro crystal cartridge, the TX88, an improved version of the Studio P or Studio O which normal record players used. The cantilever had holes drilled or punched all the way down it to make it light, and the specification was 20Hz to 20kHz.

'But the next step was a Decca Deram cartridge. We added an outrigger counterweight to the arm, because the Deram ran at a fraction of the weight. It tracked quite well.

'It was a couple more years before I could afford the "proper" Decca arm and head. I used to look at a row of them on the wall at Musicraft in London, and think, "One day I'm going to have one of those." And in 1964, I did. I was qualified by then, getting about £12 a week. I saved up and got the Decca Professional arm, and a Garrard 301.

'I stayed with the Decca FFSS cartridges for three generations. I



had a Mark II, a Mark III and then the London, which was a Mark V really. When they were working, and the record was good, they were magical. When they weren't, like the little girl with a little curl, they were horrid! In fact, I'm sure I destroyed a lot of records. But when it was good, my goodness there was nothing like it.'

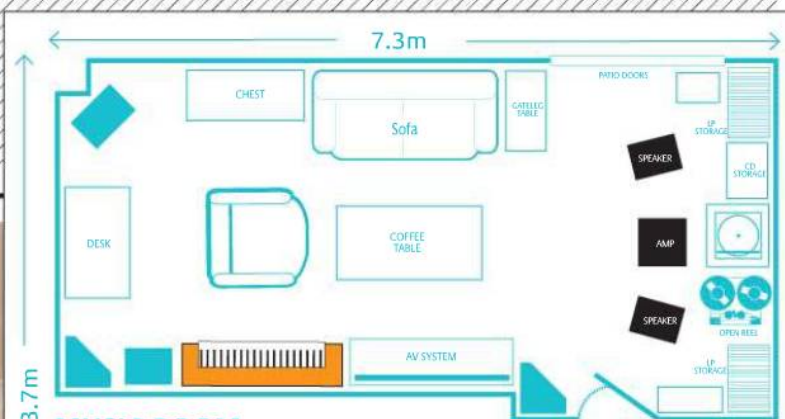
AN EARLY MISTAKE...

In 1971, Lawrie changed to a Thorens TD125 turntable and, less successfully, to a Transcriptors unipivot arm.

'Yes, there was a mistake! It was at the time when the Transcriptors turntable had appeared in the Clockwork Orange film and I'd read in magazines that this was a fantastic arm, fluid-damped and all the rest of it. But it was a pain to use, all floppy-floppy.'

RIGHT: Lawrie also happens to be a skilled cabinet-maker. The result is that all his LPs and CDs are neatly housed in these custom-built units. As for the kit rack, this is from Finite-Elemente





MUSIC ROOM

Undeniably long and narrow, Lawrie's room still allows him to enjoy good soundstaging and a natural balance. For some years Lawrie's hi-fi and previous speakers were placed at the other, slightly narrower end of the room, but despite endless experimentation, the sound was never satisfactory, with a bass hump, constrained imaging and a lack of openness. But the problems disappeared when the speakers were moved back to their present position! Now, with the Peak Consult speakers well controlled by the articulate and powerful Ayre amplifier, the bass quality is fine and the overall sound is seamless.



'I first heard Quad electrostatics in Imhofs.... We were young oiks with leather jackets. I'm sure they thought we were there to raid them!'

And not a good match for the Decca, I take it?

'It was awful. I think that was what made me give up on Deccas and go for SME and Shure. When I heard the Shure V15, I didn't think it was anywhere near as good as a Decca at its best, but it was consistent. I could make it track, and I could play my records.'

By then, Lawrie had changed to Quad's transistor pre/power combination, the 33/303.

'I don't say it was better, I don't say it wasn't as good, it was a different presentation. But at the time, I wasn't really getting what I'd

now call stereo. I had two-channel with – sometimes – something in the middle! There was no sweep, no soundstage at all.

'And it was years before I did have that. I was always aware of two speakers playing, never heard the speakers disappear. Until one day, I heard Quad electrostatics.

'That was in Imhofs, near Centre Point in the West End. Imhofs was quite posh, and we were young oiks with leather jackets and motorcycles. I'm sure that they thought we were there to raid them! Anyway, one day there, I heard a pair of Quads. I thought,

"Hello, that's different!" I had walked through a soundstage, of sorts. The sound wasn't coming from the speakers, but from behind them. It wasn't in an arc, but it was detached from the speakers, the first time I'd heard that. And I thought, "Well, one day..."

SPREAD OF SOUND

'At that time, I'd moved on to Celestion Ditton 25s. They were well recommended in the magazines, but in fact they were very disappointing. They had an ABR (Auxiliary Bass Radiator) and what they gave you was loads of woolly bass. ☹️

ABOVE: Peak Consult speakers driven by a big Ayre amp with SME and Nagra sources make this a truly classy system. No screen between the speakers here, as the separate AV system faces across the room. On top of the electronics are seen HRS damping pads

HI-FI @ HOME

'Then I looked at the Spondor BC1, but I'd heard of earlier problems with blown drivers, and that put me off. The three-way KLH 103 also sounded good, so I went with that. It had a fantastic finish, and I'd had the speakers a long time before I realised it wasn't real wood. It was a vinyl wrap!

'Eventually I did get Spondors, the SP1, and now I did have stereo. No depth to talk of really, but there was a spread of sound. Like a wall behind the speakers, rather than an open hall, though.

DRIVEN TO LINN

'I'd had the Thorens TD 125 upgraded by the late Charles Trayhorn at Metrosound, and it was working well. But the pressure from the magazines, to go to the Linn Sondek, was just too great! I felt I must be missing something.

'So when I'd piled up enough pennies, I got a Linn. I used the Mission 774 arm, which I'd had on the Thorens, the first arm that I'd heard giving true, deep, thunderous bass from my Audio Technica AT32E cartridge. But I thought, when I can afford it, I'll get an Ittok. Which I then did, followed by an Asak cartridge, and later a Karma.

'I ran this for four years, having it tuned up every year at a Linn Klinik. It would come back sounding amazing, for a while. Yet it always seemed thick around the middle – not as clean and open as I wanted.'

Lawrie had upgraded the Quad 303 to a 405, but was then seduced

by Conrad-Johnson valve power amplifiers, first an MV45 and later by an MV75A.

'It was Jim Dovey, at Acoustic Arts in Watford, who got me interested in the "whole system" approach. I heard the Krell PAM 7 pre, which he'd put on as a reference while we listened to possible alternative preamps. At the end of it, I said "Well, I want the Krell!"

'I also got the SD Acoustics SD1 speakers, with open-baffle mid and ribbon treble. They had a great depth of bass, but you needed to be a decent distance away from them.

Otherwise they didn't integrate.

'And I moved from the Linn to the Oxford Crystelle. It came with a Rega RB250, and I used an Audio Technica

Stilton, a cheap cartridge compared with the Linn Karma. But the whole set-up sounded much better.

'I then got an SME IV, a cracking arm, I thought. But eventually, in about 1998, the turntable bearing packed up – it juddered and jumped around! The manufacturer had gone out of business, so that was the end of the Oxford.'

Lawrie replaced that deck with a Michell Gyrodec SE, later upgrading this with an Orbe platter and DC motor. He found it better-sounding than the Crystelle, lowering the surface noise in particular.

'The Spirit 3 is by far the best cartridge I've ever heard'



ABOVE: Speaker cables from Virtual Dynamics, the SME 20 deck's power supply next to Nagra CDP, and Ayre K-1x preamp.

BELOW LEFT: SME Model 20/2 turntable with SME Series V arm / Transfiguration Spirit 3 cartridge

BELOW: The Peak Consult Princess speaker



'Then in 2003 I got an SME 10. I'd heard the SME 30 at a show, and thought it the most neutral combination I'd heard. I couldn't afford the 30, but I was later able to move up to the 20, and equip it with an SME V arm.'

Cartridge changes up to this point had included a Goldring Excel, then an Ortofon MC25 and then an Ortofon Kontrapunkt B.

'I thought that was splendid, until I heard the Benz Micro Glider! A totally different sound, more spacious, more natural. I ran that until I got the current Transfiguration Spirit 3. Which is by far the best cartridge I've ever had.'

Alongside Lawrie's turntable, unusually, is his Revox pro PR99 open-reel deck.

'I started with a basic domestic tape recorder in 1967, then moved on to a Truvox, then an Akai 4000D. And then on to cassettes, from 1974 until I got rid of my Nakamichi 150E in 1998. Then it was MiniDisc for a while. But when I retired in 2001, I was looking for things to repair. I restored a number of Revoxes, and ended up keeping the PR99.'

A WRONG MOVE

But we've got behind with the speaker side of the story. Lawrie acquired the SD1s in 1988, and still had them when he moved to the present house two years later.

'I placed them where the current speakers are, and it worked because we sat on the settee miles away from them! But I had this old hankering for the sound that was in my mind. And in 1992 I managed to stretch to a pair of Quad ESL-63s. ☺



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'By that time, though, I had moved the room around, with everything, including the speakers, at the other end. And that was my biggest mistake. It took me years to realise I could never get a good sound that way.'

So, sadly, Lawrie didn't get the best from the ESL-63s. He replaced them with the Avalon Arcus, from Stephen Harper of Audiophile Consultants.

'I was knocked out by them. But they didn't sound the way they had at Stephen's place. I tried everything. Until, finally, I moved them to the wider end of the room. Suddenly, it all opened up! The sound breathed, the bass hump had gone, and it was totally different.'

'Later, I heard the Peak Consult Princess speakers which I have now. They were even more neutral and open. And once again, it was "I've got to have those!"'

AYRE AND NAGRA

When the ESL-63s came in, the Conrad-Johnson MV75 had been replaced by an Exposure XVIII, but the Krell preamp stayed in the system until 2001.

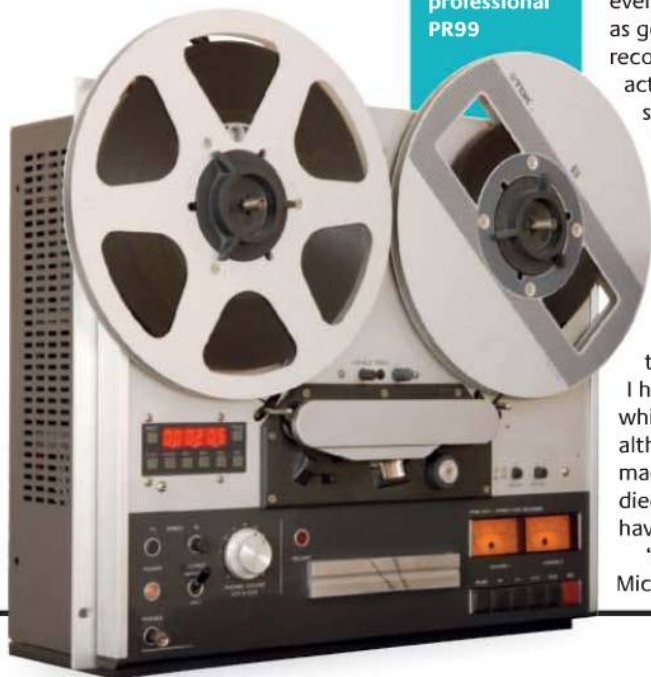
'Then I got the soldering iron out and built some World Audio kits. It was fun doing them, and took me back to my younger days. But 300Bs just didn't have the power. A very nice sound, provided you didn't expect to hear it!

'I went to a Rogue Audio 88, which had enough grunt. I disconnected the noisy fan and



ABOVE: Lawrie's other hobby: his radio room upstairs houses his superb collection of of Eddystone receivers, all restored by him and in full working order, along with other RF equipment and test gear

BELOW: Lawrie has also restored and sold several Revox open-reel recorders. He hung on to this lovely professional PR99



made an Aertex top to keep the valves cool. I went back to Conrad-Johnson for the preamp, a PV-108 and then a PV-12A, which was particularly good.

'But I heard something better again. Ayre was the first solid-state that sounded like valves to me. It had the spaciousness, the openness. I have the Ayre K-1x and the V-1x and I still love them, even though, inevitably, I've heard something better still, which is Spectral.'

Lawrie hasn't yet heard anything better, though, than his current CD player, the Nagra CDP.

'Remember that in the early 1980s, we had rubbish records. Noisy, cheap pressings. When CD came along, I thought, this is it! Unfortunately, I got rid of an awful lot of LPs.

'But then you would read everybody saying that CD is not as good as vinyl. I bought my Linn record player after I'd got CD. I actually said to the chap in the shop, "I want a Linn because I think it will be closer to what I'm getting from CD." He said, "It'll sound better!" which of course it did.

'But I never felt that CD failed to give me proper stereo. I started off with the original Marantz CD73, then the Meridian MCD. Then in 1988 I heard a Denon DCD-1500 player, which I thought sounded good although most of the Japanese machines didn't. Unfortunately, it died on me and the repair would have cost too much.

'But by then I'd heard the Micromega CD3 transport and Duo

BS converter. It was classy-looking, and it sounded sublime. I had that until it died too, in 1998. And there was no sign of Micromega in the UK at that time.

'So I thought, I'm not going to buy another expensive player which is going to die on me! The Marantz CD63SE KI was getting good reviews in the audio press, so I bought that.

FRENCH FIX

'Then I found out that Micromega hadn't closed down, they had merely gone home to France! Thanks to Acoustic Arts,

I got my player sent back there and repaired. It cost me £300.

'I went back to it for a while, but then I got a Shanling 100T – staggeringly good looks, played HDCD discs and, perhaps best of all, it had a valve output.

'That was nice. Until I heard the Wadia 861! A different league, a whole new world of sound. Suddenly, I really felt that CD was capable of good things.

'And then a couple of years ago, I came across the Nagra. With good discs, it can sound staggeringly good. What it doesn't do, is make the lesser discs sound dire. It does at least make them sound OK. And this is important to me.

'I've tried to remain true to the sound I'm aiming for, and once or twice, particularly when buying CD players over the years, I have come unstuck. Looking for audio Nirvana, I realise that there's always going to be something better.

'But I think now I'm going to stick with this, and I'm quite happy too!' ☺

'The 300Bs?
Nice sound as
long you didn't
expect to hear it'



Paul Miller Editor

Technician and writer on all things audio for over 25 years, Paul Miller took over the editor's chair in 2006. He invented the QC Suite, used across the audio industry

Hi-fi – a consuming passion

Inspired by a reader's letter published in last month's *Hi-Fi News* **Paul Miller** looks at the science and subterfuge behind the hi-fi and AV industry's specification of power consumption

Power consumption. It's the subject of much fanfare by every large scale CE manufacturer looking to enhance its 'green' credentials. But it's also the subject of some confusion if our postbag is any guide [Sound Off, *HFN* Sep '10].

The government is doing its bit, reminding us to switch off unused mobile telephone chargers while toughening the 'standby' consumption regulations. TV manufacturers are struggling to limbo under the 1W barrier. After all, it's not just the little on/off LED that's juiced-up in standby – so is the onboard IR receiver and logic, sitting there 24 hours a day just waiting for you to lift the remote handset...

POWER PLAY

How times have changed. Most of us will remember a period when high-end 'Class A' power amplifiers were favourably judged by their sheer inefficiency. A 50W power amp that sucked 500W from the wall just had to sound great, right? While the tide is turning, there are still some anachronisms – the fabulous 20W triode tube amp that graces our cover this month idles at 430W and generates nearly as much heat as a half-bar radiator. Otherwise, amp manufacturers are typically trying to push down consumption without sacrificing output power, fueling the rise and rise of various Class D technologies.

Nevertheless, 'green pressure' is stoking a new numbers game where less is definitely more. Ironically, the worst offenders are often AV receivers from the Far East – the same products that promise 7x100W but actually mean '100W one channel at a time' often boast an impossibly low power

'A 50W power amp that sucked 500W from the wall just had to sound great..'

consumption. No wonder hi-fi buffs are beginning to question the laws of physics!

Up until very recently the rules erred on the side of caution. UK kit was, and still is, governed by the BS/EN60065 low voltage directive which encouraged manufacturers to measure consumption at 'full everything' according to its claimed specification. So if an amplifier boasted 7x100/8ohm in its brochure then this was exactly the condition used at the testing house to rate its consumption. Incidentally, this is also the method I use for our published

measurements, along with the idle and standby figures where appropriate.

Up until recently, some manufacturers would even double their consumption ratings just to be on the safe side. The regulations stipulated that their products could be 100% over-rated but no more than 20% under-rated.

ALL CHANGE

But now, as I've alluded, there's been a change in the rules. Today, safety approvals bodies have tweaked the procedure, first establishing the maximum power output of the amplifier (all channels to clipping) before winding the volume back to achieve

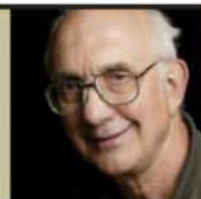
ABOVE: Canadian brand Bryston's 7B SST² amp promises 600W/8ohm but rates its power consumption at just 515W

just 1/8th of that output. The amplifier's draw from the mains is now measured at this point, rather than at full pelt.

So an 80W amplifier is now required to have its power consumption measured and quoted at 10W because the governing body feels this is a more realistic mean power output. The thermal tests are also conducted at this revised 1/8th output but it's also the reason why the figures screen-printed onto the rear of hi-fi and AV amplifiers often don't seem to add up. The more pro-active manufacturers will add a true maximum power consumption figure to their specs, but it's not a mandatory requirement.

You'll not be surprised to learn that different countries also have different sets of standards. We discussed Pioneer's SC-LX90 in last month's Sound Off pages but it's possible to pull out another example from the other side of the world. Bryston's powerhouse 7B SST² amplifier is very conservatively rated at 600W per monoblock. When I had this beast on the lab bench [*HFN*, July '10] it was pulling 1.05kW from the AC mains at 1x600W/8ohm, an efficiency of about 57%. Yet on the back panel, Bryston has this at 515W. Go figure. ☺





Barry Fox Technology journalist

Barry Fox trained in electronics with the RAF and worked as a patent agent, but he gave that up to enter journalism. He is one of the world's top technology writers

Music? It's all in the mind...

Becoming a top session player means thousands of hours of practice, but one seasoned musician says he has been able to achieve this without picking up his instrument. **Barry Fox** is intrigued...

In the bad old days, musicians came up in one of two ways. They studied 'classical music' and learned to read at sight under a teacher who hated pop and jazz, or they picked up jazz or rock by ear, and seldom learned to read.

The twain seldom met. Surely one of the most painful recordings ever made was when EMI teamed classical violinist Yehudi Menuhin with jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli. I wince whenever an opera singer with enough vibrato to sink a battleship tries to swing.

And I will never forget non-reading drummer Buddy Rich struggling to play 'Strike Up The Band' at the Royal Festival Hall with one of London's Symphony Orchestras, apparently without any rehearsal. The orchestra obviously wished they were somewhere else. So did Buddy. And so did I.

TOUGH SCORES

Now all that has changed. Most jazz musicians have trained at a music college, which teaches sight reading. So if you listen to music recorded in UK studios you will often be hearing session musicians who are jazz players by night and pay the mortgage by sight reading tough scores during the day.

Sometimes these session players will be credited on the sleeve but often not. Among the 'first call' musicians there will often be trumpet player Gerard Presencer and reed player Nigel Hitchcock. Both record for Linn Records. Both worked with Ray Charles and Robbie Williams. Either or both can be heard behind Tom Jones, Jamiroquai, Kylie Minogue, Take That, Joni Mitchell, The Spice Girls, Paul Weller, Tina Turner and the Pet Shop Boys. But they have

'The orchestra wished they were somewhere else. So did Buddy Rich. And so did I'



radically opposing views on how to get to the top and stay there.

This recently emerged from their open correspondence on the science of learning skills. Late last year NYJO, the magazine of the UK's National Youth Jazz Orchestra, interviewed Nigel Hitchcock. He had auditioned for NYJO at the age of 11, and astonished everyone by effortlessly sight-reading the most difficult charts. At

the age of 16, Hitchcock left the youth orchestra and became a highly successful professional musician.

The interviewer wondered how much practice

Hitchcock now did. 'I've never practised since I left the NYJO,' he replied. 'Never,' he continued, 'I don't agree with it. I do all my practice in my head.'

In the next issue of the magazine, Gerard Presencer (who has taught at the Royal Academy of Music, and is a professor at Berlin's Hochschule für Musik) took Hitchcock to task and begged aspiring musicians not to listen to the published advice and to 'keep practising'.



LEFT & ABOVE: Hitchcock and Presencer – both musicians agree that practice is essential yet vary wildly in their interpretations of it, Hitchcock declaring that it's all in the mind!

Now Nigel Hitchcock has come back with an explanation of how he 'stumbled across a way of learning that fast-tracked me to the top' and how it also works for sportsmen like David Beckham. Hitchcock's first lesson with a saxophone taught him the fingering, and from then on he 'internalised the process', singing notes and making the fingering without touching an instrument.

'By my second lesson I had done four or five hours of practice on my sax, but over 50 hours without it... when you use the imagination in this way the brain can't tell you that it's not real.'

COMPUTER GAMES

'My only superpower is my ability to concentrate for long periods of time, something learnt through playing computer games. With all the money spent on education, isn't it time these things were looked into in order to give pupils the best possible chance?'

Hitchcock's abilities surely prove that his no-practice theory works for him. But can it work for others? Did David Beckham really *learn* to bend the ball off the football pitch?

This looks to me like a very worthwhile subject for a university research grant. ☺



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Barry Willis

Journalist for top American audio-video publications

While his main interest is high-end audio, Barry Willis also writes about the culinary industry, visual art and theatre for a huge variety of US newspapers and magazines

Misadventures in 3D

While having the hottest new technology can certainly provide a thrill, the price can sometimes be unforeseen glitches and frustration when fixes don't work. **Barry Willis** recounts one such tale...

Several mutually dependent industries have high hopes for the growing popularity of 3D television, but if the experience of one Northern California custom installer is an accurate gauge of 3D's progress on the home front, it's perhaps best to wait until the engineers work out some of the bugs.

Of course, some consumers are too eager for that, such as a longtime customer of San Francisco Bay Area-based Kepke AV, for whom proprietor Bernie Kepke recently installed a new 65in Panasonic VIERA 3D TV (model TC-P65VT25, for those keeping score) and matching Panasonic 3D Blu-ray player (DMP-BDT350).

A NEW RECEIVER

After wrestling the big screen into place and patching the BD player into the customer's otherwise excellent system, Kepke discovered that his Denon home theatre receiver lacked the bandwidth to pass a 3D signal, verified by calls to tech support at both Denon and Panasonic. This necessitated ordering a new receiver.

While awaiting delivery Kepke experimented with connecting the BD player directly to the TV, through a 14m HDMI cable snaking through the wall. Still no 3D, attributed by cable maker Straightwire to the fact that the cable itself wasn't the latest iteration, and verified by Panasonic tech support, who refused further consultation until the cable was upgraded to HDMI 1.4.

Straightwire sent two of its 'Super HDMI 1.4' cables from Florida. Kepke also had two identical 2m 1.4 cables. None was able to generate 3D from the

'My wish is that manufacturers would stop using the public for beta testing'



ABOVE: Custom installer Bernie Kepke pictured at the California Audio Show 2010 between a pair of the mighty Acapella High Violoncello II horns (see Showblog, p6). They cost \$40,250 – apiece

Blu-ray player, leading him to surmise that the player was at fault. He also couldn't get a 3D image from the latest Comcast DVR, explained by Straightwire founder Steven Hill as a 'bad send/repeat function'

in the Comcast box. A test with a DirecTV satellite receiver, however, went perfectly, with reliable 3D via the short cable.

Kepke went back to the Panasonic Blu-ray player with

the same cable that had worked with the DirecTV box. 3D material was initially unstable, with white lines and onscreen flashes. It then inexplicably stabilised, but the 3D effect disappeared. Kepke explained the ephemeral 3D this way: 'It was as if the TV had learned it could do 3D from the

DirecTV receiver,' alluding to rudimentary consciousness among electronic devices. He turned the TV off and on repeatedly and 3D returned. He went back to the DirecTV receiver and 3D wouldn't work until he changed channels.

BEYOND REASON

A new Blu-ray player worked well with the Panasonic TV, but only through one of the 14m cables, which Kepke's installers then carefully pulled through the wall. After a few days of needing to change channels to get satellite 3D to kick in, that glitch went away. The system now cooperates amiably, for reasons still unclear.

'It was as if the components had to spend a week in preschool, learning to play well together,' Kepke commented when the struggle was over.

'My wish is that manufacturers would stop using the public for beta testing.' ☺



Jim Lesurf Science journalist

Jim Lesurf has spent a lifetime in audio, both as an engineer at UK hi-fi company Armstrong and reader in Physics and Electronics at St Andrew's University

Return of The Mod Squad

Mass manufacturing means it's no longer viable to build components cheaper than those in the shops, but there are many benefits to be had from exploring the DIY route. **Jim Lesurf** explains...

Fifty years ago it was common for enthusiasts to build some of their audio equipment. Even if they didn't build it 'from scratch' they would be likely to put together a kit or modify what they had bought to suit their personal preferences. More experienced readers (OK, yes, I do mean 'older'...) will recall Heathkits and the variety of speaker kits that made self-build easy, sometimes also exploiting the quirks of ye olde purchase tax!

STILL POSSIBLE

Since then, electronics has developed. In the process it has often become more capable. Economies of scale mean that nowadays a mass manufacturer can sell finished equipment cheaper than you can buy the components. Indeed, in many cases these days you would struggle to even find anyone willing to sell you just one or two of the more fancy specialised components.

As a result, the DIY approach seems to have dwindled. But it is still possible. And despite the miniaturisation, and the complexity of some devices, the Mod Squad still flourishes.

For functionally simple items like audio amps there are many self-build

designs. The most obvious examples are valve amplifiers which – given good components – can deliver fine results. But less-well known are the ways that still exist to create your own home-brew by taking opportunities to adapt or exploit commercial and mass-market items.

Perhaps the process gives you the sense of satisfaction that comes from other activities, such as being able to cook your own food and get results you and others prefer to those that come out of a supermarket packet. The trick with audio components is to find out what items you can get that are the easiest to modify, and find tips on how to do the modifications.

For example, I discovered years ago that the old Quad 34 was, for me, an ideal basis for modifications to get a preamp tweaked to suit my personal preferences.

One reason for this is that all the components are identified with printed markings on the circuit boards.

Another was that you could get a copy of the circuit diagrams. As a result I use two Quad 34s. But both of them have been

modified in a number of ways. OK, some of the possible changes are complicated. Altering the behaviour of filters or tone controls may require modelling software and a test bench.

But many other tweaks are trivially easy. For example you can alter the input sensitivity by changing a few resistors, or improve the bass response by changing a couple of capacitors. These are alterations anyone who can hold a soldering iron without burning themselves and who is willing to buy a few components over the web can make.

SURFING FOR CIRCUITS

Another example of an area where 'DIY' activity is often based on modifying

existing items is 'NONOS'. To see what I mean, try typing a phrase like 'non oversampling DAC mods' into Google. Some of the responses will show circuits you can build

'You can improve
bass response
by changing a couple
of capacitors'

'from scratch' but others show how to make a few changes to the wiring of a commercial product.

As with any electronics you need to take care and work safely. You also have to accept that a mistake may ruin what you are working on! But in some cases you can experiment using old kit and see if you then like the results.

Is this worthwhile? I guess the answer depends on you. I can only say, try it and see – if you are willing to pick up the basic skills required. Experimenting can mean you learn more about how things work and can give you a chance to try out something different. It can also give you a sense of pride and satisfaction if the modified equipment produces sounds you prefer to those you might have bought in a shop. It's not for everyone, but beware, it can be addictive! ☺



ABOVE: One of the author's two modded Quad 34 preamps – modifying purchased equipment allows you to tailor the sound while providing an invaluable insight into how components work

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Steve Harris Contributing Editor

Steve Harris edited Hi-Fi News between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

Quest for the perfect system

Perfection is not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away... **Steve Harris** talks to Touraj Moghaddam, whose new cables seek to put these words into practice

Years of observation have given me an ungrudging respect for anyone who can design one decent-sounding piece of hi-fi, let alone a complete system, and stay in business doing it.

At one time Musical Fidelity's Antony Michaelson, for whom the term mover and shaker might have been invented, could sit you down in front of his own CD player, amplifier and speakers. When he put on a CD of himself playing Mozart on the clarinet, he wouldn't need to ask if you were impressed.

Eventually, Antony gave up with speakers, attacking the dynamic range issue from the other end instead by building bigger amplifiers than anyone else. But he was scornful of big-ticket high-end cables.

It was Bill Low of Audioquest who explained to me how the cable business could flourish while many component brands were languishing. Say you'd invested too much, financially and

emotionally, in your main components to change them, but you had the itch to upgrade. Yes, new cables! You could even get them into the house, and into the system, without your wife knowing. And they would make a difference to the sound.

A difference, but an improvement? Every system is different, and every location inflicts a different mix of mains-borne and airborne radio-frequency pollution, so the results are unpredictable. And, when an expensive system still sounds nasty, we'll be told that it needs even more expensive cables. But for the maker of hi-fi components, cables are a necessary evil, because you've got to get the signal from A to B. They're not a tuning aid.

HAND ON THE PULSE

Touraj Moghaddam designed his first turntable in 1985, following up with speakers, amplifiers and CD players, which have evolved into the Roksan range of today. Touraj has never stopped doing blue skies research, his 'quest for the perfect system', channelling his ideas into an entity called TM Systems (www.tmsaudio.co.uk). After long experimentation with hand-built cables, using a complex variety of conductors, grounding and shielding, he came up with a manufacturable, cost-effective version called Pulse B.

'I'm not saying that the Pulse is the end of cable design,' he explains, 'but it's definitely a different cable design. It's not done like an accessory. It doesn't matter what system you put it in. It just knows that at the output of one component you have roughly such and such a bandwidth, roughly such and such kind of level.

'Between A and B it could be bombarded by crap, but it needs to ensure that the electromagnetic wave



ABOVE: Touraj Moghaddam, pictured here with the Artemiz tonearm, launched in 1987

gets to the other end without too much modification.

'My philosophy has always been, look for the weakest link, what is limiting the whole thing. You tackle that first, and that will lead you to the next weakest link, and so on and so on. It's just

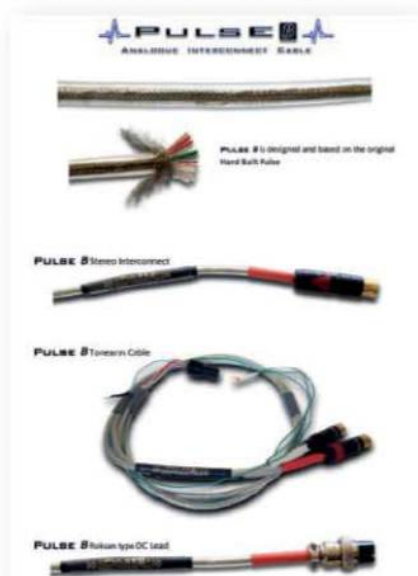
applying a bit of methodology to the way you work, so you don't allow yourself to get lost.'

Listening with a pair of Pulse B interconnects in a non-Roksan system, I was instantly

convinced. They just seemed to get out of the way, letting me hear effortlessly what was going on in the system. They reminded me instantly, for example, that I'd moved the speakers a couple of inches and forgotten to put them back. I'm sure Touraj's approach isn't unique, and others are working on similar lines. All I can say is that this one works.

Could it be that sometimes, it's still the designer of the main components who has the best idea of how to connect them all together? ☺

'New cables! You could even get them into the house without your wife knowing'



ABOVE: The Pulse range of cables is available from TM Systems at www.tmsaudio.co.uk

Somehow Coventry didn't seem such a bad place after all



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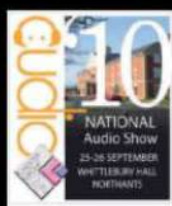
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YOUR VIEWS

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IN A RADIO DAZE? FREQUENCY PLANNING IS KEY TO FUTURE

Steve Harris hit the nail on the head with regard to the future of radio being a flavour of DAB, preferably with single frequency networks [see 'Investigation' *HFN* Oct '10]. Band II is an ideal band for national networks because it gives good wide area coverage – including inside buildings – without a vast number of relay stations. (Compare that with UHF television.)

Large numbers of people who want good reception already have horizontally polarised aerials, which suggests that the existing (newish) transmitter aerials may be useful for some time to come.

The greed merchants who think that Band II needs to be freed to make money selling it off should consider how small it is. Band II is ideal for future digital networks. Band III also does very well – a single 400kW transmitter at Lichfield covered from Liverpool to Luton and Ludlow to Lincoln in the days of 405 line TV with rooftop aerials.

In the future, I think it is possible to use clever transmitter configurations to make much better use of the frequency space for existing DAB receivers. Barry Fox would not wish me to be too explicit since it is possible that the method and equipment can be protected by patent!

What we have to leave behind is a method of good frequency planning which, for example, has a 4kW transmitter on 105.4MHz in London with 5kW transmitters re-using the frequency in Leicester and South Wales. There are large areas of interference in between. Leicester even butts in as I drive to Oxford along the M40!

Meanwhile, the group test of FM tuners in the same issue

mentions 'crowded urban areas' and then suggests in the verdict that this is a US phenomenon. I beg to differ. In the sticks of South Bucks, we need good directional aerials and even better adjacent and overlapping channel discrimination. I give just two of many examples:

1. High Wycombe R4 is 50W on 94.4MHz and does not get on well with neighbouring Radio Berkshire at Henley, which is 250W on 94.6MHz and is the strongest Band II signal at my home address.

2. High Wycombe Three Counties Radio is 200W on 98.0MHz and suffers with interference from Radio 1 at Rowridge IoW, which is 250kW on 98.2MHz. It looks like some good frequency planning could help.

By the way, I was fascinated to see mention of Ron Smith Aerials in Paul Miller's editorial. Most of Smith's aerials appear to have disappeared over the last 20 years – or is it my imagination? I have now looked at his site.

Kristen Cadman, via e-mail

Paul Miller replies: Readers wishing to view the BBC's UK radio coverage should check out <http://txlib.mb21.co.uk/v/bbc-national-fm-radio/>. I used a huge Galaxie Model 17 rig for well over 20 years (Model 23 pictured below) which proved resilient to all but the heftiest of wood pigeons!



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Live and direct

ANOTHER MODERN DIRECT-DRIVE DECK SPOTTED IN THE WILD

I read Paul Miller's column on direct-drive turntables with interest, as well as reader Dave's response in which he points to the Rim Driver as a modern example. Well, there is also the VPI Super Scoutmaster Reference Rim Drive. I understand it to be quite something. A review by KK would be most interesting!

Meanwhile, I would just like to say what a fantastic job you are doing with the magazine. I really am enjoying it. I love the retro equipment articles – fascinating – and the vinyl reviews too. Vive la difference; vive la yellow border! Long may it last; please keep it up.

Gerard Smith, via e-mail



ABOVE: VPI's Super Scoutmaster Reference – see www.vpiindustries.com for more on this deck

Notes on the BC1

AND THE MAGIC OF THE LS3/6 REMEMBERED...

A couple of minor comments about the Spendor BC1 and Rogers LS3/6 ['Audio Milestones', *HFN* Sept '10]. The upper tweeter on the BC1 was an STC but the upper tweeter on the LS3/6 was a Celestion HF2000.

I note your comment on the BC1 being turned down by the BBC because there was a demand for higher power handling at some point. The LS3/6 had much less power handling than the BC1. It had a very light paper voice coil former which heated up quickly. I believe the speaker was rated for 25W. Rogers soon stopped making it for home use and replaced it with the Export Monitor with much more robust power handling, but it lacked the magic of the LS3/6.

I suspect the voice coil was also responsible for the lovely rich warm character of the LS3/6. It was the most 'beautiful' sounding speaker I recall hearing, with the memory of its wonderful 'coloration' still in my ears over 35 years later.

Allen Edelstein, USA





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Analogue, Blu-ray and AV

READER'S EXPERIENCES SUGGEST A HAPPY MEDIUM MAY ONE DAY BE FOUND...

There has recently been some debate about AV content in the magazine. I think AV gear is interesting because I like multichannel music. I listen to my SACDs (and some DVD-As) and I enjoy them. Now I want to jump on the Blu-ray bandwagon as I believe the format has the potential to be a great music source. Interestingly, it seems that all the new Sony Blu-ray players are incorporating SACD playback.

However, I have not yet bought a Blu-ray player because of the problems with HDMI, as highlighted in your September issue [see p91]. So currently all my music sources are still analogue connected. I hope and wait for a solution for this conundrum.

Having said that, I also have a partly inherited collection of vinyl that I treasure. I, like many others, have only recently discovered that vinyl, despite its reduced dynamic

range and surface noises, transmits a passion and realism for the music that digital sources simply cannot. Just listening to Wagner you discover that the horns you thought sounded like horns when heard via CD were not in fact at all sounding like they should when you hear them on vinyl. So please, don't stop your coverage of analogue components – at least for the time being.

Enrique Soto, via e-mail

Paul Miller replies: Fear not – there is no question of your favourite hi-fi mag abandoning its core subject matter! Although everything we hear is 'analogue' there's no doubt the very best vinyl front-ends bring a little of 'something special' to the musical party. Nevertheless, I believe our hobby is a broad church and we will always strive to represent the very best in audio, whatever its colour.



ABOVE: Like all players in Sony's current Blu-ray series, the BDP-S570 will replay SACDs

New phono stage?

WILL MODERN DEDICATED DESIGN BEAT IN-BUILT MERIDIAN MODULE?

I wonder if you could help me regarding phono stages? I use my old Meridian 101 preamp with a 'universal' MC module as a phono stage, and I have often wondered how this would compare to today's very expensive dedicated stages. I particularly have in mind the Anatek MC1.

I have a VPI Scout turntable with a Koetsu Black cartridge, a Chord CPM3300 integrated amp and PMC OB1 speakers. The sound is very impressive, but could it be significantly bettered by a more modern phono stage? The Meridian 101 with the 105 monoblocks was a very good system in its day.

Tony Hackett, via e-mail

Steve Harris replies: You will undoubtedly benefit by adding a modern phono stage to your set-up, but it's debatable how far you can go before the Meridian 101 becomes the limiting factor.

We suggest you first find a dealer who will allow you a home trial or two. Then you can assess whether you want to spend more on a really refined phono stage, or whether it might be better to put the money towards a preamp upgrade.

We haven't reviewed the Anatek, but alternatively you might try the well-established Acoustic Signature Tango Mk II at around the same price, or one of the Lehmann models.

BELOW: A fine choice – Lehmann's Black Cube Decade with PWX II power supply



All systems go?

WHY NOT BRING US REVIEWS OF COMPLETE SET-UPS?

I would like to request a new type of article, if I may. I would like a feature on the matching and mixing of different makes of hi-fi components with the pros and cons explained to the uninitiated.

I have, with the help of my local hi-fi dealer in Bath, matched my ultra reliable Creek 4330 amplifier with a new Rega Apollo CD player, through my B&W 685 speakers, which in turn, are on Apollo speaker stands. Even my Pure DAB tuner works well in this set-up. (I do have a large, roof mounted aerial for the tuner.)

The result is, to my ears, audio nirvana. The detail is absolutely amazing for such a fairly small financial outlay. My whole system only comes to around £2500, including QED speaker cable and a pair of Atlas interconnects.

Ralph Warfield, via e-mail

Paul Miller replies: Our popular Hi-fi@Home series [see p88] provides us all with a very personal account of a fellow enthusiast's journey – very often a lifetime's account – on the road to audio nirvana. We hear about the great upgrades, the surprise results and the unfortunate dead ends. The story of system matching doesn't get any more 'real' than this.

Classical Icons

PLEASE BRING US SOME CLASSICAL MUSIC LPS

Your Vinyl Icon has become one of the features I most look forward to when my copy of the magazine lands on my mat each month – apart from the equipment tests, of course! But why no classical recordings? For example, what's the best recording of Mahler's Symphony No 5 on vinyl? Or the best Beethoven come to that? And surely there must have been many a recording session which saw batons (and maybe the odd fist) fly as musical differences were explored.

Now, there's a challenge!

Robert Coaltman, via e-mail

HFN replies: If there's one thing the HFN team likes it's a challenge, Robert. Look out for our Yearbook 2010 (out Friday 15th October) where you just might find an icon to your liking.



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Technics SP-10 turntable

The first direct-drive turntable used advanced electronics to create one of the most technically competent decks of all time. But how does it measure up to today's best?
Review: **Haden Boardman** Lab: **Paul Miller**

As a teenager, the first serious turntable that I paid hard cash for was a Technics direct-drive SL-1200/II. As my hi-fi knowledge grew, the deck was replaced by a much more expensive 'audiophile' offering. Frankly, it was nowhere near as good, but badge snobbery took over. How could a Japanese deck, and a direct drive deck at that, sound inferior to the best of British?

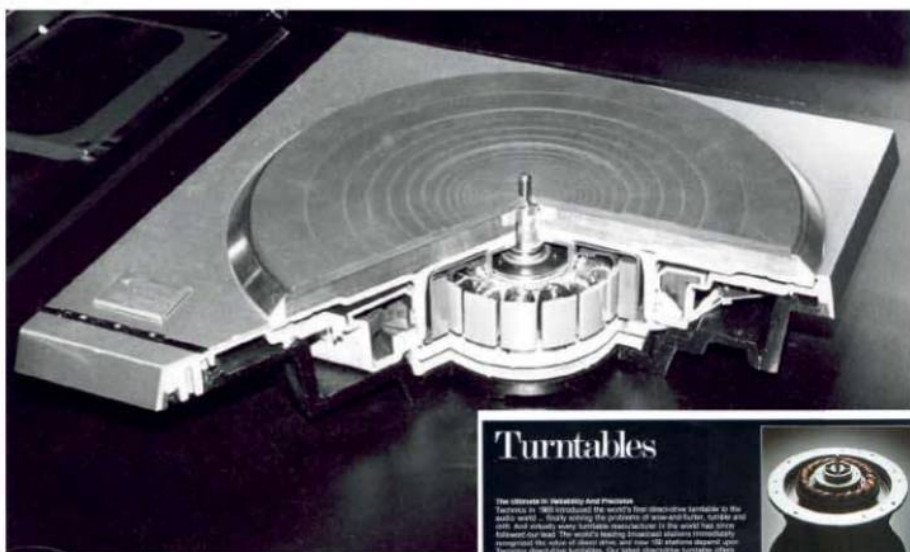
I blamed everything, from the cartridge to the phase of the moon – apart from the deck itself and its supplied tonearm. Dazed and confused, I had yet to realise the superiority of direct-drive systems over belt drive. I had not yet had my moment of turntable enlightenment, courtesy of a Garrard 401 [see *HFN* July '10].

MOTOR UNIT

The SP-10 motor unit was launched in 1969 and was one of the first direct-drive decks to be marketed by the giant Matsushita Corporation of Osaka Japan. Branded 'Technics, by National' or 'Panasonic', or a combination thereof, the



ABOVE: Fully specified BBC 'Gramophone Unit' based on the MKII and incorporating RIAA preamp, fader and BBC's own pantograph arm



ABOVE: Cut away showing the incredibly complex motor system, and unique construction
RIGHT: Ad for SL-1000, with its obsidian plinth

deck made its UK appearance in 1974, later going through MKII and MKIII guises before disappearing in the mid to late '80s.

The earliest model could be purchased with a basic (crude) sprung wooden plywood plinth, supplied in matt black plastic or in real tree wood – which looks like plastic, in that nice 1970s way!

The decks were also available as a complete turntable system – the SL1000 – which comprised the deck and the ruby bearing EPA100 tonearm along with a hybrid constructed plinth – the SH10B3. This was manufactured from rosewood and obsidian glass.

A thin-walled aluminium casting provides a base for the DC brushless direct drive motor. The motor itself was truly revolutionary: the rotor was fashioned from a manganese-aluminium alloy with 20 poles while the stator windings were fed from an elegantly designed transistor control circuit. Extra coils on the motor stators fed a control voltage back to the simple circuit, locking the motor's revolutions. Speed selection is achieved by simply varying the DC power supply to the complete motor assembly.



The MKI deck has the power supply built in, 'suspended' on rubber bushes underneath the main aluminium chassis. Speed is selected via a switch, two preset controls within the main motor assembly and two 'fine controls' on top of the chassis. These allow the user to set the speed accurately via stroboscope markings on the neon-lit platter. Once set, it maintains accurate speed with little drift.

However, Matsushita's engineering team was clearly not satisfied. Based on the success of the original deck, and technical developments offered by rivals EMT, the MKII gained a much more sophisticated speed control and power supply arrangement. The new power



supply was larger, off board and connected to the deck via a four-pin XLR-style cable, providing the smooth DC and 140V for the neon strobe lamp. Final speed control was now via a servo-controlled system in a bid for greater accuracy. A Quartz reference was used for absolute accuracy and, in addition to the 33.3 and 45rpm speeds of the MKI, 78rpm was also offered. In 'consumer' guise the MKII offered no pitch control, the deck being 'locked' precisely to the selected speed.

INSTANT STOP

As well as the electronic advancements, which resulted in a faster start up time (one quarter of a revolution on the later decks compared with half a revolution on the early decks), a mechanical brake band was fitted for 'instant stops'. An electronic, hard-wired remote start/stop switch was also made available. The MKI start/stop was achieved quite crudely by turning the mains AC supply on and off. Extra rubber damping was fitted to the MKII deck's platter and its

'Even with a
plywood plinth
I was knocked
out by the sound'

physical mounting was made more secure, via three screws. It simply rests in place on the motor on the MKI.

The final MKIII variant had an even bigger power supply, offered pitch control as standard, plus a massively more powerful motor with heroic levels of torque. And all this was combined with massive platter mass. A small elephant balanced atop the platter would not stop it revolving at precisely the desired speed!

In the UK, the vast majority of SP-10s on the secondhand market are ex-broadcast MKII decks from the BBC or IBA.

Most have been modified back for domestic use now, but are instantly recognisable

as they have a larger outboard power supply (or sometimes a home made power supply), the start/stop switch has usually been removed, and larger tell-tale lamps are mounted around the platter to indicate the selected speed.

Some of these ex-broadcast samples can be in a shocking state. With the start/stop control located on the control desk fader, and with some decks custom made for specific tasks, it can be a hard job to get the deck just to rotate.



ABOVE: The author's SP-10 MKII housed in a home made 'light' plywood plinth with Audio-Technica AT1503/II broadcast arm

Paramount to the Technics' sonic performance is the plinth (more on this later). Famously Technics developed the SH10B3 obsidian-based solid plinth, though in my opinion, it's a bit overrated.

Most ex-broadcast samples have now been de-cantered from their radiogram-style wooden record player cabinets and DJ consoles into home made plinths but some have been truly appalling – MDF boxes housing both the deck and the huge power supply, for example. Luckily, it is not rocket science to make a reasonable enough plinth following Technics' own paperwork.

CLEAN MACHINE

The one time I experienced at home the 'full monty' SL1000 obsidian plinth and EPA100 arm set up I found the sound to be

BELOW: Price list from 1977; MkII is £499.95
BELOW RIGHT: Square buttons on the BBC plinth illuminate to show the speed selected

National
Recommended
Retail Price List
18th April 1977

Technics
High fidelity audio equipment

MODEL	RECOMMENDED RETAIL (incl. VAT)
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SU 7700	85.00
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SU 7500	219.00
SU 7400	319.00
SU 7300	419.00
SU 7200	500.00
TUNERS	
ST 7700	98.00
ST 7600	110.00
ST 7500	100.00
ST 7400	210.00
ST 7300	
ST 7200	
TURNTABLES (Excluding Cartridge)	
SL 20	82.00
SL 21	84.00
SL 2000	90.00
SL 1900	119.00
SL 1800	124.00
SL 1700	140.00
SL 1600	174.00
SP 10 Mark II	499.95
RECEIVERS	
SA 9000	110.00
SA 8100	172.00
SA 8100N	180.00
SA 8300	234.00
SA 8400	349.00
DOLBY CASSETTE DECKS	
RS 202ALSD	100.00
RS 816LS	129.00
RS 273USD	152.00
RS 600USD	140.00
RS 640USD (Perspex Cover Incl.)	190.00
RS 671USD	226.00
RS 676USD	294.00
RS 680USD	400.00

VINTAGE HI-FI

incredibly detailed, but almost clinically clean. In fact I would describe the presentation as on the thin side, lacking in bass authority and decidedly uninvolved. It sounded almost like an early Japanese CD player. For the record, in 1978 an SL1000 set-up cost £1000 while a Linn LP12 complete with Grace G707 tonearm was priced £250.

IT'S A KNOCKOUT

Around two years ago I purchased a domestic SP-10 MKII chassis and set about building a lightweight solid plywood plinth for it along Technics' recommended design. The intention was to make a direct comparison between an SP-10 MKII and a similarly mounted Garrard 401 with identical arm and cartridge. (Sadly, to date this comparison has not been fully realised, both decks ending up with totally different plinths and different arms!)

Arm and cartridge choice for this set-up was a Fidelity Research FR64x of similar vintage and slightly newer Ortofon MC30 Super cartridge (the late '80s metal body version). The results were simply staggering. Even with a basic plywood plinth I was knocked out by the sound.

On old favourites, such as *The Jacques Loussier Trio Plays Bach* the superbly simple piano, bass and drums captured in classic early Decca stereo underlined the clean and precise direct-drive sound with all three instruments superbly located within an incredible soundstage. Total realism! Two other slightly contrasting jazz recordings from the same year – Dave Brubeck's 'Take Five' and Miles Davis's 'Kind Of Blue' sounded breathtaking.

Moving forward 50 years, some white label Drum & Bass tracks, at 45rpm, underlined the SP-10's spectacular dynamics further – as did some early '80s

Duran Duran, and disco beats courtesy of Grace Jones. Compared to a Garrard, there was a slight absence of weight, while the bass possessed a slightly resonant quality. Also, I felt the Garrard's more traditional cast chassis provided a more realistic foundation for the low-end than the thin-walled aluminium construction of the Technics. Being ultra picky, I was also able to pinpoint a high pitched 'wowwowow' noise in the background. It was only noticeable in between tracks, and on the most silent of pressings.

As with the Garrards, the plinth is fundamental to the sound of these decks. Too high a mass can kill life and openness while a low mass plinth can give a sound that's too resonant and coloured. Professor Akito Kaneta, in Japan, developed

ABOVE: The MKII featured a separate power supply, electronic start/stop switch, electronic speed change, and narrow stroboscope window

what must be considered the ultimate plinth system for the SP-10. Measuring 600x500x960mm (wdh), Kaneta's plinth is constructed from four layers of solid lime wood strips, is very heavy, and quite complex to construct. Additionally, the direct-drive motor is removed from the thin-walled aluminium base and mounted directly into the lime wood.

MKI decks are considered to be the poor cousin of a MKII or MKIII. Curiosity got the better of me so I ended up buying two MKI decks for not a lot of money (admittedly one was faulty!) in order to compare them directly to a MKII. I have to say I did not feel the overall sound quality to be inferior.

POWER PLAYS

A very simple tweak on the MKI is to remove the entire power supply from underneath the deck and locate it elsewhere. Technically the MKII electronics are a lot more complicated than those of the MKI. While both iterations can suffer from flat capacitors in the power supply and on the motor itself, both MKI and MKII decks are bullet-proof reliable – especially given that there is no belt or idler to break or wear out. My faulty MKI deck was fixed inexpensively with a new mains



LEFT: Original SP10, start/stop is mains on-off, speed change a slide switch, on right is stroboscope window



SP-10MK II

BELOW: Rear serial number plate; note 'Technics by Panasonic' and the different shaped platter on this, the less familiar MKI deck



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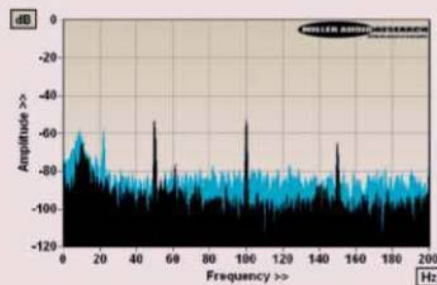
LAB REPORT

TECHNICS SP-10 MKII (Vintage)

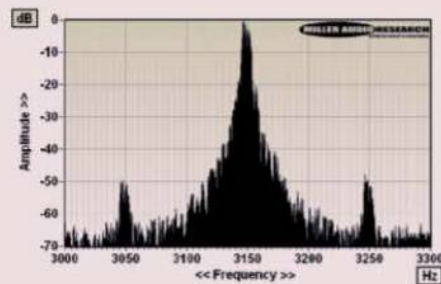
Sadly, they don't make 'em like this any more. Technics' massive 20-pole direct-drive motor is clamped via three bolts to the alloy platter of this MKII player, the huge 6kg/cm starting torque bringing both motor and table up to speed within one half of a second. Such is the stability of this combined motor/platter that you can cue up a track on a *stationary* LP and only then hit the start/stop button. Your vinyl will be pitch-perfect (or at least within $\pm 0.12\%$) before you could reach to wind up the volume control...

Pitch stability in this instance refers to the deck's absolute speed accuracy, measured as 33.29rpm at the 33.33rpm setting. This would be perfectly acceptable in a deck made yesterday, but for one that rolled off the production line over 30 years ago it's nothing short of incredible. Any cyclical speed variations – wow and flutter to you and I – are also kept low with a peak figure of 0.09%. In common with Garrard's idler-driven 401 [see *HFN* July '10] the modes are largely discrete with wow appearing at $\pm 2.8\text{Hz}$ (every four poles of the motor) and flutter at $\pm 50\text{Hz}$ [see Graph 2, below].

Although the motor is driven from Technics' outboard DC power supply there's clearly a suggestion of mains-related breakthrough visible as 50Hz, 100Hz, 150Hz peaks on the unweighted rumble plots [see Graph 1, below]. To a degree, these peaks will be influenced by the choice and wiring of Haden's AT tonearm, so might be considerably lower in other installations. The through-bearing rumble remains impressively low at just -69.5dB (re. cartridge output at 5cm/sec) – again more than a match for modern turntable bearings. PM



ABOVE: Unweighted bearing rumble from DC-200Hz (black infill) versus silent LP groove (blue infill) re. 1kHz at 5cm/sec. Tested with AT1503II tonearm



ABOVE: Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted $\pm 150\text{Hz}$, 5Hz per minor division). A $\pm 2.8\text{Hz}$ wow is seen alongside 50Hz flutter sidebands

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.29rpm (-0.12%)
Time to audible stabilisation	<1sec
Peak Wow/Flutter	0.02% / 0.07%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-66.6dB
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-69.5dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-52.8dB
Power Consumption	18W
Dimensions (WHD)	369x103x369mm



ABOVE: Plan view showing the thin-wall aluminium construction common to both the MKI and MKII decks. The decks' chassis were the same size

transformer and mains switch (the original being 110V, I suspect the deck had been accidentally plugged into a 240V mains supply).

PRICE GUIDE

The MKI decks are few and far between in the UK. They sell in the US, either as a pure chassis or on the simple sprung plinth for \$300-\$500. Any imported deck will need to be used with a small autotransformer – they all seem to be 110V.

Domestic MKII decks usually come complete with the SH10E power supply. Most are universal mains voltage. Ex-broadcast decks can come with all sorts of variations, from a home made power supply to

modified factory rack mount units. However, a clean MKII with SH10E power supply will cost you between £600-£800 for just a chassis, and around double that if mounted on the obsidian SH10B3 plinth.

A broadcast deck is worth around £300-£400 for a clean example and decidedly less for one in rough condition. 'New' solid wood plinths can be purchased for around the £300 mark to suit either the MKI or MKII. Like the solid Garrard decks, arm choice is totally unrestricted.

Compared with many modern decks the Technics is underrated. Indeed, on paper its technical performance is outstanding and given its performance on a decent plinth, it's massively undervalued. The MKII is a sound investment; the MKI is an out-and-out bargain. ⚡

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Matsushita's revolutionary turntable still proves valid some 40 years after it made its first appearance. Its technical performance is without question state of the art, with the MKII and MKIII decks raising the bar to the highest possible levels. Sound quality is also at the top of the game, though the plinth system is the final arbiter when it comes to absolute performance. A classic deck and strongly recommended.

Sound Quality: 89%



ABOVE: Not a multi-changer version but a demo of the powerful motor torque



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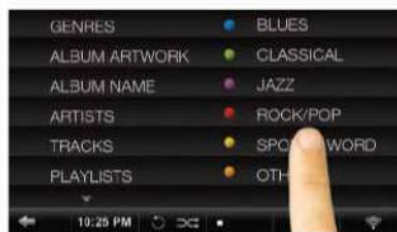


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AUDIO MILESTONES

WM-D6C • WALKMAN • SONY • JAPAN

Sony Walkman Pro

Introduced in 1984, the Sony Walkman Pro quickly drew attention for its innovative and compact design. But it was the addition of Dolby C and a line-in socket that made it the audiophiles' favourite. **Ken Kessler** rewinds to the very beginning...

Look at your iPhone, Nokia, Sony, LG or Samsung mobile phone. As small as a pack of cards, yet able to record a conversation at the press of a button – albeit of mediocre quality. You want 'better'? Olympus, Sony, Philips, Marantz, Zoom and others offer stereo digital hand-helds, from a meagre £20 or so up to a few grand for Nagra's broadcast-grade devices. No moving parts, self-contained microphones, easy downloading to a computer for editing and storage, and – most important of all – a time limit on recordings bound only by the size of the memory card. Back in the days of analogue, all you had was tape.

Few remember that the lowly 'Compact Cassette' wasn't even invented for music: it was devised for memo recording, for dictation. But so convenient was this recordable medium that, for nearly three decades, it developed into a format that would serve as both a primary source for pre-recorded music and as the *de facto* portable recording device for broadcast journalists and musicians who wanted something pocket-sized,



ABOVE: Original Sony WM-D6 with the supplied headphones – a far cry from ear-buds. The model name was changed to WM-D6C when Dolby C was added

LEFT: Sony founder and inventor of the Walkman, Akio Morita, pictured in 1989 on the 10th Anniversary of the portable player

when reel-to-reel was simply too cumbersome or fiddly.

It would transcend its humble origins so completely that some artists would issue commercial releases *from* cassettes.

HI-FI CREDENTIALS

If any device secured its role for convenient recording-on-the-go, it was Sony's WM-D6C, aka 'the Walkman Professional'. By the time the 'Pro' was released, the cassette had already found its place in high-end systems, but to everyone's surprise, this portable, aimed at BBC reporters and the like, sounded simply fabulous when fed via its line outputs into a proper full-range sound system. Thus, a nasty, throwaway, shoddily-constructed, prone-to-breakage, all-plastic sound carrier, born in the early 1960s, had evolved into something good enough to be called 'hi-fi'.

One the last of the formats devised entirely by a single manufacturer, the cassette was created by Philips, who were probably inspired by the first widely-known attempt at placing a reel of tape and its take-up spool into an easy-to-use shell. In 1958, RCA released a stereo tape cartridge, reversible just like quarter-track open-reel, but its size mitigated against exploiting the quality offered by its 1/4in tape: at 5x7in, it was simply too large to lend itself to portable usage. And no other audio-tape-in-a-shell format – not 8-track, Elcaset nor DAT – would achieve the market penetration of the Compact Cassette, the lowliest of them all.

Philips cleverly reduced the package to employ 1/8in tape, handily contained in a shell measuring a mere 4x2.5in and travelling at 1 7/8 ips. As we now know from observing the herculean



self-contained, battery-powered unit measuring only 4x7in and under 2in thick in its protective leather case. Think 'fat and chunky VHS cassette' and you've pictured the dimensions. Its weight with batteries was 1.5lb, or less than a current net-book.

FORMAT FOR THE MASSES

Launched in 1984, only five years after the iconic, blue-and-silver, playback-only Walkman TPS-L2 of 1979, the Walkman Professional's arrival was enabled by the stabilising of the cassette into a viable format that not only offered recording ability according to its original brief, but one which had become a playback format able to rival the

dominant LP. It appealed equally to people who didn't care about recording their own music: they could use them

in portables and in in-car players, which placed cassettes in a category to which LPs could never aspire.

Production of blank cassettes commenced in 1964, with pre-recorded tapes – differentiated from blank 'Compact Cassettes' with the name 'Musicassette' – appearing in Europe the following year. When

high quality tape formulations above the basic ferric oxide tape and even the cassette shell itself would appear fashioned from classy materials for truly fastidious users.

Given that AC-powered, domestic decks did not have to sustain shocks, inclement weather, battery power or the rigours of travel, and neither were they bound by minuscule dimensions, one can see how

gentler conditions allowed cassettes to flourish.

Played back via over-engineered machines, starting with the Wollensak and Advent units of the late 1960s, through the Tandbergs, TEACs, Revoxes and Nakamichis that would represent the format's apotheosis, the sound could approach reel-to-reel excellence.

And yet Sony, whether by accident or design, found a way to package one of the best-sounding decks, regardless of size, in a

'When Dolby C was added to the Walkman Pro a legend was born'

efforts undertaken when creating and launching formats, needed to sell it to one's rivals, it is generally accepted that the cassette enjoyed quick acceptance because Philips licensed the format free of charge. And, particularly salient in the context of this story, it is believed that Philips did so due to the insistence of Sony.

DECK TO IMPRESS

Whatever it was that removed the license fee, the resultant industry-wide support turned a low-fi product into one that would be refined to a point where noise reduction systems, especially Dolby B and C, could enable music playback that would pass muster in high-end systems. Dolby complemented

ABOVE: Top end of the WM-D6C, showing record button and level controls, set away from the main transport buttons

BELOW: Original service manual for the WM-D6C plus a Sony publicity shot for the earlier WM-D6. The WM-D6C did not offer two headphone outputs – the second was removed when Dolby C was added due to space constraints



AUDIO MILESTONES



ABOVE: The tape setting section for tape type, choice of noise reduction, and the LEDs showing level and battery condition

Advent applied Dolby B noise reduction and the facility to exploit the superior chromium dioxide (CrO_2) formula tapes, in a cassette deck released in 1971 and based on a solid Wollensak unit, sound quality passed the critical threshold. But Sony's first Walkman did even more than the Advent to turn the cassette into a format for the masses.

ENTER DOLBY C

'Full-size' portables like the TC-D5 were offered by Sony for those who wanted to record on the go. What the WM-D6 (without the 'C') did was to marry the functionality of the TC-D5 to a compact form that, while larger than an original Walkman, was substantially smaller than the TC-D5, or rivals like Nakamichi's superb three-head 550. And it could fit in a pocket or operate as

a hand-held if fitted with a clip-on stereo microphone. For those who wanted to hold the mic rather than the recorder, the WM-D6's case came with a shoulder strap.

When Dolby C was added and the model name was changed to WM-D6C, a legend was born. It would become a mainstay for journalists; mine (serial no. 205456, for those who appreciate such trivia!) recorded dozens of interviews for this very magazine. Journalists loved them because the Walkman was so familiar by the early 1980s, so operating it became as intuitive to gadgeteers of the 1980s as texting is today. Bootleggers adored them too, but that's another story.

Its layout, with main transport controls up one side and lesser controls on the other side and the top, were the result of employing a mechanism like that of the TCM-600 and the TPS-L2 – much in the same way that bulkier cassette recorders emulated the layouts of portable open-reels like Nagra. Everything simply 'fell to hand', with the minor controls relegated to less accessible areas, and the record button placed away from the other transport buttons to prevent accidental recording.

Sony did not apply the 'Professional' name lightly. They built in robustness by fitting an upgraded capstan servo-mechanism like the larger TC-D5's. To this they added quartz speed control to provide perfect speed accuracy. It was augmented by

a 'Speed Tune' setting at the back, positioned between the line-in and line-out sockets and the 6V DC input. This consisted of an on/off switch and a rotary to speed up or slow down the tape by plus-or-minus 4%, ideal for playing back tapes made on machines that lacked perfect pitch. This was deactivated when recording, the system automatically reverting to quartz-locked fixed speed, so one couldn't make off-speed tapes by accident.

USEFUL LEDS

Other details included ferrite heads, a DC-DC converter to allow the electronics to operate at a

higher voltage than the four AA batteries would normally provide, mic attenuation with 0dB and 20dB settings, 3.5mm sockets for the supplied

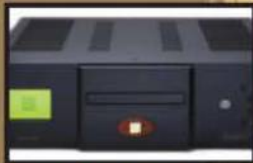
stereo headphones and an external microphone (there was no built-in mic), switching for normal, chrome and metal tapes, and selection of Dolby B, C and Dolby off.

Monitoring was provided by five red LEDs, with a scale from -10dB to +6dB. These also showed battery power and could be switched off to prolong battery life. The tape counter was a mechanical roller type. Recording level was set manually by a rotary control; as the unit lacked any form of limiter, the LEDs proved useful.

Although I've never seen the virtually identical WM-D6 – the earlier version without Dolby C – it apparently allowed the user to feed two sets of headphones. The

'Bootleggers adored them too, but that's another story'





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AUDIO MILESTONES



addition of Dolby C via a Sony-made IC begged the removal of the second headphone socket due to space considerations.

Another improvement found on the WM-D6C was a line-in socket, for easier integration into a hi-fi system with full use of a tape loop, for superior recording from line sources.

Aesthetically, the two are close – the obvious giveaway is the lack of a Dolby C setting, but the colour of the word 'Professional' was apparently changed from green to white for the latter model.

BUYING TIPS

Reliability was exceptional for a portable, but hardcore users speak of the need to keep an eye on the drive belts, and to go easy on the press buttons, which are heavy, mechanical types for the necessary,



positive feel, rather than soft-touch controls. Also, later models are said to have been improved with surface-mount components, mainly to improve the manufacturing process, but we have not been able to ascertain the serial numbers to which the changes apply.

Sony does not disclose the total production figures of its products, but I was able to find out from their spokesperson that, 'In terms of quantity, the production plan was about 10,000 units a month.' Think about it: even if that only applied to a heyday of a decade, that would mean a total production of well over 1,000,000. Since research indicates that the WM-D6C stayed in production for around 18 years, until 2002, that might be a conservative estimate.

Because of modern, compact, digital alternatives, and the sheer number of Walkman Pros in circulation, the secondhand value for a decent WM-D6C – with leather case, but probably without the supplied headphones – is satisfyingly low. I've seen them for as low as £15 at flea markets, for ones that will just about work but which are probably best for spares, to £200+ for mint models. Expect to pay a bit more, if you're an anorak who wants one of the ex-BBC models, however well-used, because they come with a BBC logo on the back.

The best place to shop is eBay, recent monitoring of the site showing junkers for as little as £30 and up to US \$400-\$600 for examples in as-new condition.

When the WM-D6C was launched in 1984, it cost 64,000 yen, roughly

SONY WALKMAN PRO TIMELINE

- 1958 RCA Victor introduces stereo, 1/4in, reversible, reel-to-reel RCA tape cartridge
- 1962 Philips invents compact audio cassette medium for audio storage
- 1963 (August) Philips' cassette unveiled at the Berlin Radio Show
- 1964 (November) Philips' cassette released in USA under Norelco name, now with trademark name of 'Compact Cassette'; reputation for portability assured by launch of Norelco Carry-Corder 150 recorder/player
- 1964 Mass production of compact audio cassettes begins in Hannover, Germany
- 1965 Pre-recorded music cassettes (aka 'Musicassettes') launched in Europe
- 1966 Over 250,000 recorders sold in USA; Japan now major source of recorders
- 1966 (July) Mercury Record Company, the US affiliate of Philips, launches 'Musicassettes' with an initial catalogue that lists 49 pre-recorded titles
- 1971 Advent's Wollensak-based 201 cassette deck provides Dolby B noise reduction and chrome tape setting for the audiophile use of cassette tapes
- 1979 (1 July) Iconic blue-and-silver Walkman TPS-L2, the first commercially-available playback-only Walkman model, goes on sale in Japan
- 1984 (February) Sony launches the WM-D6 Walkman Pro with the Dolby-C equipped WM-D6C following later
- 2002 (estimated) Sony WM-D6C ceases production

ABOVE LEFT: The WM-D6 on display at a contemporary CES show. The plaque to the right informs visitors that the product has been chosen that year as an example of innovative design

LEFT: Unlike the clip-on mics available, Sony offered dedicated models – at extra cost – which slid directly into the mic input on the side of the 'Pro' (shown below). If you wanted to use a mic on a lead, the supplied case came with a shoulder strap

equivalent to £785 in today's money – smack in between a Zoom H4 and a Nagra ARES. So even the highest current prices for those secondhand examples seem reasonable for one of the world's best-ever portables.

THE COMPACT KING

Sony's Walkman Pro wasn't the only portable recorder that could equal or better domestic decks. Nakamichi, Uher, Marantz and other Sony 'full-size' models all found favour with both audiophiles and professionals who needed a transportable model with superior sound quality, while the TASCAM Portastudio owned the home studio market for nascent rock bands in the late 1970s and early 1980s. And, yes, any one of today's sub-£500, up-to-24-bit/96kHz recorders, can outperform a Walkman Pro in a host of parameters, from battery life to low weight to lesser bulk.

But the WM-D6C can still trump them for one inescapable reason: it's purely analogue, and it still *sounds* better than any of 'em. ☺



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1. INNOVATION: Hi-Fi News: Highly Commended (Sept 2009)
2. CONCEPT: What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision: ★★★★★ (Sept 2009)
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3. EMOTION SE: What Hi-Fi? Sound & Vision: ★★★★★ (Nov 2009)

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Revolutionary ? Absolutely

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Overall, very impressive. Robert Townsend -- Stereophile Jan 08

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ITEM DESCRIPTION	SALE	NEW
Acoustic Arts Transport Drive 1 mk2 & DAC mk4.	£4000	--
Jeff Rowland Coherence 2 Pre amplifier with Cadence phono stage. In original flight case.	£6000	--
Naim CD player NA CDX 2. Boxed as new.	£1400	--
Octave Audio 'Grand Renaissance.' Publicity/display pair - unused and kept in storage for 12 years. Premium Pippy Oak veneers. This precision-engineered, craftsman built replica of the famous Tannoy Autograph can be fitted with 15" Tannoy Monitor Gold drivers. Produced for the Japanese market this model currently retails 'unloaded' (ie. excluding drive units) for £29,000. For sale at £21,000. One pair only.	£21000	£29000
Mundorf Supreme Silver / Gold. Unused. NB. All prices per pair.	Per pair.	--
0.15 uF 800v x 4	£30	--
0.33 uF 800v x 4	£36	--
1.5 uF 800v x 2	£54	--
2.2 uF 800v x 4	£62	--
3.3 uF 800v x 2	£78	--
4.7 uF 800v x 2	£98	--
5.6 uF 800v x 2	£108	--
10.0 uF 800v x 8	£166	--
AmpOhm Capacitors. Unused. NB. All prices per pair.	Per pair.	--
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5.0 uF 630v Paper in Wax / Aluminium Foil x 2	£60	--
5.0 uF 630v Polyester in Oil / Aluminium Foil x 2	£60	--
1.5 uF 630v Polyester in Oil / Aluminium Foil x 2	£60	--
1.5 uF 630v Paper in Oil / Tin Foil x 2	£60	--
1.5 uF 630v Paper in Wax / Aluminium Foil x 2	£60	--
1.5 uF 630v Paper in Oil / Aluminium Foil x 2	£60	--
Jensen Paper in Oil caps - unused. NB. All prices per pair.	Per pair.	--
5 uF 200v x 2	£60	--
20 uF 100v x 2	£120	--
Jensen Copper Air-Core Foil / Paper Inductors. Unused. NB. All prices per pair.	Per pair.	--
.3 mH x 4	£200	--
0.9 mH x 2	£100	--
1.0 mH x 2	£100	--
1.8 mH x 2	£120	--
2.5 mH x 2	£140	--
Art Audio Diavolo Monoblocs	£3750	--
Linn Sondek. 20 years old. Excellent condition. Plays very smoothly.	£375	--
Cardas Golden Cross interconnect. 1.5m.	£400	--
Cardas Golden Cross interconnect. 1m	£300	--
Cardas Golden Cross a/c. 1.5m (2 pcs)	£175 each--	--
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MUSICAL Fidelity KW phono stage, used one (£2500) £1200, no offers Tel: 01708 457691 [KL]

MUSICAL Fidelity A1 CD pro player, two years old, mint, boxed, Philips Pro 2 mechanism 24-bit 192k DAC, top loader £650 Tel: Ian on 07789 712775 (Hampshire) [LW]

2. AMPS

JBL 18 subs + power amp, unused in the box £800 Tel: Gary 01543 686828 (Staffs) [KL]

ICON Audio Stereo 40i HT delay + valve up grades, light use Tel: Gary 01543 686828 (Staffs) [KL]

QUAD 707 power amp, serial no. Q)) 1945, excellent condition, 120 watts per channel, buyer to collect, offers to: v0006i9281@blueyonder.co.uk (Maidstone, Kent) [KL]

SANSUI amp AU-X510 £85 Tel: 020 8950 0658 / email: michael.stewart5@ntlworld.com (S.Herts) [KL]

MARANTZ PM66SE amplifier £90 Tel: 01708 457691 [KL]

UNISON Research S6 valve amp, not working, offers, buyer collects Tel: 01492 853091 [KL]

ART Audio Maestro valve monoblocs 50WPC & valve VP1 preamp, vgc, serviced recently and new valves, original cost £9500, sell for £2500, can demo Tel: 01476 579201 (Grantham, Lincs) [LW]

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WORLD Audio 6550 power amp, World Audio Klippi pre MC MM £350 each Tel: 01733 708725 [KL]

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MUSICAL Fidelity A1 CD pro player, two years old, mint, boxed, Philips Pro 2 mechanism 24-bit 192k DAC, top loader £650 Tel: Ian on 07789 712775 (Hampshire) [LW]

5. DACS

THETA Pearl transport and Probasic 3a Dac £1250 (£4750) Tel: 07973 220663 (Leics) [LW]

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PAIR Goodmans Magister multi unit loudspeakers, 15in bass, 5in midrange, tweeter, mint condition, original boxes, £150 contact Mr. Leech, Kendal, Cumbria Tel: 015395 60082 for more details, buyer collects [KL]

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REVEL F32 floorstanders, maple veneer, unmarked, original packaging £1500 (West Sussex) [LM]

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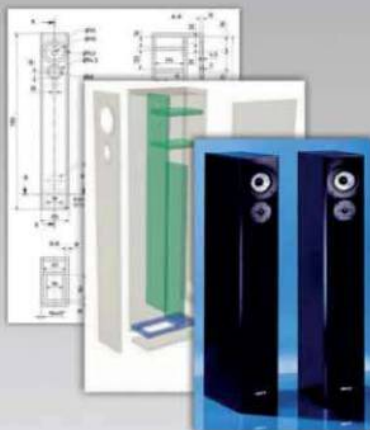
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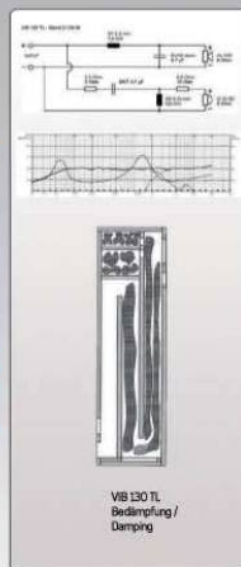
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Hi-Fi News magazine incorporates: Stereo, Tape & Tape Recorders,
Audio News, Record News, Audio Record Review, The Gramophone Record,
Which CD? and Music Business. Hi-Fi News is a
member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC)
and of EISA. (www.eisa-awards.org)



Hi-Fi News is published on the first Friday of the
month preceding the cover date by IPC Inspire, part of the IPC Media Group.
It costs £4.00 per issue (£51.35 for 12 months) in the UK; £107.47 in
Europe; \$144.63 in North America, £90.41 for the rest of the world. Rates
are for annual delivery. See subscriptions order form on page 70 or call
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Distributed by Marketforce (UK) Ltd, The Blue Fin Building, 110 Southwark
Street, London SE1 7SU. Tel: 020 7633 3333. Typeset by CTT, London E17.
Printed in England by Southampton, Unit 17-19, Upon Ind. Estate, Poole,
Dorset BH15 5SN. ISSN 1472-2569.

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LAST WORD

OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Hi-fi, a YouTube clip and a 1980s comedy sketch...
Ken Kessler on the gap between 'them' and 'us'



YouTube has been a source of some truly wonderful footage, especially impossible-to-find-on-DVD music clips from the 1960s and 1970s. I try to stay away from it because one clip leads to another, and before you know it, three hours have disappeared. And, surprisingly, there *are* some hi-fi moments like the legendary 'Gramophone' sketch from *Not The Nine O'Clock News*.

For those of you too young to recall it, this sequence perfectly conveyed – when hi-fi still mattered out in the real world – all that was wrong with snotty hi-fi stores. It was a clarion call which the industry ignored, back in 1980 or so, to its peril.

NEAR THE KNUCKLE

In the sketch, a normal consumer was pitted against a pair of know-it-all hi-fi salesmen, who proceeded to take the mickey out of him rather than proffer the service he merited. Yes, it was hilarious, especially when Mel Smith, as the baffled customer, asked a viciously sarcastic Rowan Atkinson about the difference between a 'gramophone' and a 'turntable'. The reply? 'About 30 years and a plastic cover to you, chief.' Hilarity ensues.

Those looking beyond the obvious saw that it worked because it was so near-the-knuckle. Too many hi-fi retailers back then were obnoxious, and now we're paying the

price for their arrogance: some retailers still do their best to drive customers away. To this day, such cleverer-than-thou imbecility remains, and it is behaviour bordering on the criminal, at a time when a salesman should offer his first-born to any customer who walks through the door.

Thirty years later – with coincidental symmetry – a perfect sequel has arrived. 'The High End Store' (just type the title into the search field at www.youtube.com) is

a computer-generated masterpiece in which a normal customer enters a high-end emporium, looking for something that 1) comes in a single box, 2) will play CDs, 3) accept her iPod, and 4) won't cost more than \$500.

As this clip makes its way around audio cyberspace, you can bet your TD-124 that *every single audiophile viewing it* is siding with the salesman, who is doing his best to explain to the woman why she doesn't want a Bose Wave radio.

You rock with mirth. You shout at the female customer, 'Cloth ear!' 'Idiot!' You cheer the salesman as he attacks Bose. Nothing gets through to her. We've all been there, when trying to explain our love for superb sound quality, or justifying our purchases to sceptical friends. You feel his pain. He even offers to kill himself.

'I am upgrading from an iPod and I am tired of listening through headphones,' she

explains. Still he carries on with his sales pitch, suggesting to her something for \$2000. She grows increasingly frustrated.

'Look, here's the deal. I want everything in one box. I want the music to come out of the box. I want to play my CDs. I want to play my radio. I want to fill my room with sound. I want to pay no more than \$500.'

Now you *must* ask yourself, is that so unreasonable a demand? It's not even as if the imaginary retailer loses interest when she mentions so relatively small a budget. He rattles off every audiophile truism imaginable. She counters with, 'All my friends tell me Bose is the best!' He suggests Peachtree Audio. He suggests Sonos. 'I don't want a bunch of pieces. I don't want to do anything but hook it up and listen to music.'

THE BIGGER PICTURE

If you have even the slightest ability to stand back and look at the bigger picture, you will realise that there is only one thing wrong with this scenario: that the customer should never have entered a high-end store in the first place. It had me tearing my hair out, not because I sided with the salesman – which, in my heart of hearts I most certainly do – but because you know that the customer is the norm, the real deal. Nothing can convert those who do not wish to be converted.

By all means feel for the salesman, but equally, we should be realists. This is 2010. As I write, HMV is haemorrhaging floor space for CDs. The government is still, sneakily, trying to shut off FM. Downloads have probably passed disc sales.

Before the clip ends, and before the punch-line extracts a final sigh for any viewer who ever cared about sound quality, the customer sums up all of the salesman's efforts, which in turn means all of *our* efforts. At the same time, she is evidence of the single greatest failing of the high-end audio industry: the failure to communicate the true worth of a magical-sounding system to non-audiophiles.

With four words, she defines the gap between 'them' and 'us'. After a fair stretch of the salesman's haranguing, she merely utters, 'Why would I care?'

Why, indeed. ☺

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